

DEMOCRACY, IDEOLOGY AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF MEANING IN THE ELECTRONIC AGE

**A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF
ELECTRONIC MEANS OF COMMUNICATION**

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts, Department of Politics, University of Natal, Durban,
1997.

Dedicated to SHANE VAN DER SALM,
a truly human character who followed his dreams,
lived the truth, and now swims in the glow of pure form.

“. . . Day after day the wind blows away the pages of our calendars, our newspapers, and our political regimes, and we glide along the stream of time without any spiritual framework, without a memory, without a judgement, carried along by “all winds of doctrine” on the current of history, which is always slipping into a perpetual past. Now we ought to react vigorously against this slackness - this tendency to drift. If we are to live in this world we need to know it far more profoundly ; we need to rediscover the meaning of events, and the spiritual framework which our contemporaries have lost.”

- Jacques Ellul, *The Presence of the Kingdom*, (p.138)

Abstract

Set against the background of public life and political practice in late capitalist mass democracies, this study presents information and communication structures as central to the formation of discursive opinion and the negotiation of social identities. Discussion and processes of exchange, that is, are conceived to be crucial to politics in the full democratic sense (as the pursuit and realization of human emancipation). Taking the mass media to be the central institutions and a primary locus of power in the contemporary public sphere, this study seeks to explore both their semiotic, discursive natures, and the material, institutional context in which they are embedded. The concern to theorize the impact of the mass media on the public sphere's internal processes of social, cultural and political discourse - and therefore on individual and social orientation and action - is essentially a concern to come to terms with the operations of ideology and power in industrial capitalist democracies. The overall context of social communication is changing, and with it the ideological codes of power. It is therefore imperative to arrive at some understanding of the dynamics of signifying processes, the ways in which the culturally specific rhetorical lenses of the media filter and alter the wider framework of social understandings, and the possibilities for generating new social, cultural and political discourses critical of the mystifications of power.

Chapter One discusses Habermas's analytical and historical account of the development of bourgeois forms of social criticism in England, France and Germany during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and their effacement in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by the forces of mass culture and industrial capitalism.

Chapter Two then proceeds to address several theoretical problems and methodological flaws in Habermas formulation. Of particular concern are his understanding of the role of the media in shaping cultural criticism, and his conceptualization of the process of communication, in which the audience is cast as passive. A critical interrogation and reconstruction of Habermas category of the public sphere to suit the changing environment of public communication is therefore called for.

Chapter Three engages the pessimistic, cynical and apolitical epistemological stance of postmodernism, and rejects its unwillingness to engage in a critical hermeneutics of the structure and dynamics of ideology and power in contemporary society.

Chapter Four presents Gramsci's and Althusser's reformulations of Marx's notion of ideology, points out some theoretical deficiencies in their arguments, and suggests why a semiotic understanding of the relation between meaning and reality would be of value to a theory of ideology.

Chapter Five focuses on structuralist and semiotic approaches to language and society, and their understandings of the process of signification. Here the work of Saussure, Levi-Strauss and Barthes are seminal, though they are presented as not being entirely satisfactory. Voloshinov's alternative "social semiotics" is introduced as a more appropriate conceptual framework, taking cognizance as it does of both the dynamic and (necessarily) contested nature of ideology, and the importance of the material and social elements in the signifying process.

Chapter Six explores the political economy of late capitalism and demonstrates the need to balance semiology's textualist approach to meaning construction with an understanding of the relevance of the wider institutional context. Notwithstanding the inherent polysemy of media texts and the active role of audiences in the construction of sense and identity, this chapter argues that the character and quality of the discursive relations of advanced capitalist societies are profoundly shaped by the dynamics and principles of industrialization, commercialization, commodification and profit realization. This mediating institutional context of social communication must be taken into account by those concerned to demystify the discourses of power and their implicit agendas.

Chapter Six then proceeds to address the democratic potential of new information and communication technologies. The background for this cautionary discussion is the technologization of human culture, as well as certain depoliticizing trends within the infrastructure of so-called "Information Society", such as the growing prevalence of market principles and the increasing demands of "corporate imperatives". The chapter ends with a brief discussion of Tim Luke's argument that the participatory nature of new technologies can be exploited by counter-hegemonic groups seeking to broaden the scope of public communication in order to build a firebreak against the further colonization of the lifeworld by capital and the State.

The study concludes by arguing that despite observable tendencies towards the privatization of information and the centralization of meaning, ideology remains ever-present in modern industrialized countries, and is always open to contestation. It further suggests that the ability of audiences to actively decode ideological cultural forms according to their own interests and lived experiences, together with the potential of new technologies to circulate these alternative and often counter-hegemonic meanings augurs well for democratic practice. For not only is it possible to expose and challenge the dynamics of power, but it is also increasingly possible for audiences to contribute to the agenda of political discussion, and thereby lend substance and credibility to the discursive formations of the (much maligned) contemporary public sphere.

Acknowledgements

No human achievement is an individual act. This thesis is no different, and there are a number of people whose support and advice made all the difference. First off, I'd like to thank all those friends, family and interested others who goaded and cajoled me into finishing what at times seemed to be a distant hope. Special thanks also to Sian Buckley, for her help in proof-reading my script ; to Wayne Hohls, for his timely intervention to keep technology on my side ; and to David, for choosing the day he did. To my supervisor, Professor Raphael de Kadt, my gratitude is two-fold : first, for inspiring in me, from my early years at University, an abiding interest in social and political theory ; and second, for his critical assistance and helpful comments, as well as his commitment in keeping me on course when the abyss stared back. Thank you also to the University of Natal, for the Post-graduate Merit Scholarship I received when I began this degree. Finally, I'd like to thank my parents for their loving and patient support through the testing times. They, more than anyone, knew how important this project was to me, and I'd feel remiss if I did not recognize that without them, this thesis would not have been possible.

Declaration

I hereby declare that the following work is my own, and that whenever words and ideas of other people have been used, appropriate acknowledgement has been made.

Peter Osborn

18 December 1997

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Introduction

The broad concern underlying this study is the survival and future growth of democracy in technologically complex and rapidly-changing societies with their accompanying mass-based cultures. As a contribution to critical “oppositional” political theory¹, this study seeks to analyse both the tendencies working to subvert democratic participation in public life, as well as the potentialities immanent within the changing institutional configuration of “late” capitalist societies which hold out the possibility for evolving new strategies to enhance peoples’ political control over their own lives.² Central to this historical study into the nature and operations of contemporary democratic practice are questions about the state of cultural production, and of the political trajectory of various distributive and organizational forms of the mass media. This study will therefore be concerned to explore the institutional and technological spread of the communications and information sectors, and their impact upon the shape of democracy in the information age.

The intellectual origins of this thesis’s normative justification for democracy go back through Kant to Rousseau, and centre on the latter’s view of popular participation and choice, rational will-formation and “authentic” political community as being essential to defining interests in the

¹ The idea of a critical “oppositional” political theory is informed above all by the notion of an alternative to existing societal arrangements. It is, in the words of Seyla Benhabib (1986) allied with “... the struggles of those for whom the hope of a better future provides the courage to live in the present”. Capitalist social organization is understood to be both socially repressive *and* inherently unstable, such that the present is seen to contain both limitations and possibilities for progressive social change. An “oppositional” political theory therefore calls for both a normative evaluation of existing bases of authority, and for a critical exploration of those potentials of modernity which diverge from those emanating from the hierarchical and rational-purposive organizational systems of monetary and bureaucratic domination.

² While this study will focus on “late” capitalist social formations, it also holds that the developmental properties or tendencies of industrially advanced societies point the way to the future for less developed societies.

democratic context.³ Rousseau's work was premised not only on the idea that such interests are best *discovered* by individuals themselves - through free discussion, debate and choice - but further, that such active freedom is a value in its own right ; a condition for moral growth, self-development, and the refinement of judgement. This study therefore reflects a general-philosophical allegiance to the Kantian-humanist legacy of a human subjectivity, and the search for a foundation which would make rationality the *telos* of humankind. Enshrined within this legacy, as Fred Dallmayr observes, are the normative values of human self-reflection and moral autonomy, and "... the perennial quest for 'truth' and the 'good life'."⁴

Democracy, in some form or other, is today trumpeted by almost every strand of the political spectrum as a way of legitimating even the most autocratic regimes. This is hardly surprising, for the concept has assumed the mantle of "highest ethical good", and doubles as both a descriptive tool for factual political analysis and as an heuristic ethical device with which a given state of affairs can be normatively evaluated. This thesis takes seriously the interpenetration of the factual and ethical "moments" of political analysis ⁵, and to this end seeks to demonstrate the continued efficacy for democratic theory of the historical concept of the "public sphere".

As a societal forum for politics in which private individuals can meet to freely and openly discuss matters of concern, formulate and share common meanings, values and opinions - and thereby participate in the normative and practical decision-making processes of a given society - the public

³ These ideas of active political agency, civic engagement and common deliberation have also been pursued by Hannah Arendt (1958), in which she defines the authentic democratic polity as being constituted by a public *vita activa*, where men and women interact as the "essence" of the human condition (as opposed to the *vita contemplativa* of the philosophers, or the world of *animal laborans*, that is, man as the creature of necessity).

⁴ Dallmayr, F., (1984 : 163)

⁵ Norberto Bobbio (1989 : 157) argues that unless we do, nothing meaningful can be said about democracy at all.

sphere is considered to be a crucial index of social democracy.⁶ As Ian Budge points out, all democratic theories place normative stress on the unique sensitivity of governments to popular opinion and approval and the encouragement of open debate and voting.⁷ Democracy, he argues, is both defined and defended through its encouragement of participation and dependence on informed consent. To the extent that a "culture of critical discourse" is upheld, in which rational public debate can address itself to matters of general contemporary interest, a functioning public sphere can well serve as a barometer for a healthy democratic polity. Conversely, the impoverishment of the public sphere and the marginalization of critical discourse by technological, economic and political forces is a normative indictment on the legitimacy claims of any so-called "democratic" regime.

However, if the notion of the public sphere is to have the evocative power necessary to fuel democratic imaginations, and so enable the diffusion and legitimation of a wider array of viewpoints and information, then a critique of the existing situation cannot be content with simply identifying the tensions and contradictions within society at large. As Hegel commented, ". . . in negative fault finding one stands noble and with proud mien above the matter without penetrating into it and without comprehending its positive aspects".⁸

⁶ The term "social democracy" refers to the ideas of universal competence, responsibility and active citizenship. Not only is social democracy dismissive of the value of the mere "democratization of consumption", but it is also principally opposed to what Ellen Meiksins Wood (1995:233) calls the "liberal domestication of democracy" made possible by the specific social relations of capitalism. Social democracy, in other words, stands in contrast to "formal" democracy: it identifies the active exercise of popular power as the principle criterion of democratic values, and rejects the passive enjoyment by isolated and depoliticised individuals of constitutional and procedural safeguards and rights.

⁷ Budge, I., (1996 : 26)

⁸ Hegel, G. (1953), Reason in History, p.47, cited Bennett, T., (1992a : 47)

The epistemological underpinning of Habermas's work in general, and his theory of the public sphere in particular, evince his appreciation of Hegel's comment. For not only did Habermas object to his Frankfurt School predecessors' identification of objectification with alienation and their wholesale rejection of the value of all bourgeois institutions and practices, but, in Structural Transformation (1989), he sets out to uncover the normative principles for emancipatory praxis as they are institutionalized within the structures of bourgeois society.

The historical development of the public sphere was above all concerned with values and ends, and the capacity for "vision", identifying oppression, and finding ways to fight it in the name of social justice, cultural richness and individual freedoms. This is still a relevant project, and rather than being content with "philosophical negativity" and political retreatism, a constructive critical theory of the public sphere must seek to move beyond the discursive plane of pure critique to a discourse that continues to be critical in character, but which simultaneously addresses possible alternative strategies that will advance the project of a more participatory democracy. This involves thinking more deeply about the complex relationships among media, technology, culture and society, and exploring the categories that underpin them - such as language, consciousness and subjectivity - so as to point to possibilities for change, and identify possible points of entry for human intervention in what is rapidly becoming a reified and "non-human" world.⁹

Ultimately democracy is an ethical ideal and, as Dahl argues, it is inextricably tied to a daring vision which ". . . forever invites us to look beyond, and to break through, the existing limits of structures and consciousness".¹⁰ This is the political relevance of the notion of the public sphere - that it serves as an ideological anticipatory form that ". . . transcends the status quo in utopian fashion"¹¹, and thereby secures the

⁹ The notion of a "non-human" world figures into many narratives describing the relation between technology and human social and political life. Thus we have Jurgen Habermas charting the course of modern technology as one marked by the escape of instrumental and strategic rationality from the guidance of norms, such that the "life-world" becomes increasingly "colonized" by "systemic imperatives". Similarly, Jacques Ellul (1964) describes how technology has become so pervasive that the mentality of *le technique*, or unrelenting efficiency, has come to dominate all dimensions of human life, causing it to lose the richness and variety of true human culture. Thus, far from guaranteeing the mastery of humanity, *technique* has condemned humanity to servitude at the hands of its own tools and machines and to the instrumental rationality that they bear. In Ellul's reading, the abstraction of decisions into impersonal rules, cost-benefit analyses, or the demands of the market, amounts to nothing short of the erosion of human judgement and responsibility.

¹⁰ Dahl, R., (1989 : 312)

John Dunn (1979 : 27) echoes this view : "Today, in politics, democracy is the name for what we cannot have - yet cannot cease to want".

¹¹ Habermas, J., (1989a : 88)

normativity of the commitment to the democratic process as the rationale and goal of social existence.

I .

This study takes the view that communication and the availability of information are necessary to the realization of the underlying principles of democracy, which Bruck and Raboy identify as :

- the autonomy of individuals and communities to make choices that determine the nature of their lives;
- equality among individuals and social groups within and between communities, and
- the capacity of such agents to involve themselves in active opposition to forms of domination that limit the realization of autonomy, equality and justice.¹²

Broadly speaking, the process of "communication" refers to a set of historically varying practices and reflections upon them, bringing together human conceptions and purposes with technological forms in sedimented social relations. As such, it is a process whereby truth is established and reality constituted, maintained and transformed. Because communication involves the transfer of values, attitudes, opinions and information through individuals, groups and technologies, it is very much a "contested terrain", with conflict occurring ". . . over the general determination of the real as well as at the points of exclusion, repression, and denial, where forms of thought, technique and social relations are cast beyond the glow of the real into the darkness of unintelligibility, subversion, and disgrace".¹³

¹² Bruck, P.A. & Raboy, M., (1989 : 1)
¹³ Carey, J., (1992 : 84-7)

Communication and information media are central to the distribution and diffusion of social power, and as the dominant institutional complex configuring the superstructure of advanced capitalism, they are important institutions within the public sphere. Indeed, in terms of their importance to the whole process of cultural formation, such institutions could well claim a significant priority. Being centrally involved in the collective formation and dissemination of values, beliefs and (politically relevant) information, communication and information technologies are therefore crucial to the democratic struggle for “open” public spheres - that is, for public spheres characterized by loosely coupled forms of integration, the reflexive examination of groups and individual identities, and the ability to mobilize resources against the closure of political agendas. As such, they form the centre of this study's analysis.

Democratic political participation is here understood to involve more than simply participating in the formulation, passage and implementation of public policies, and takes seriously all activity directed at *informing oneself (and others) about public affairs*. In this regard, activity such as research into books or statistics; “surfing” electronic bulletin boards; reading newspapers; listening or watching news and current affairs programmes, or even discussing these with family and friends are taken to be important aspects of what Bhikhu Parekh considers a citizen's duty to be politically “attentive”.¹⁴

Since the analytical task of this study is to identify the communicative forms, styles and voices appropriate to democratic practice, it ought to be made clear at the outset that ALL media of communication are relevant to the subject at hand. Indeed, it could well be argued that it is theoretically short-sighted to merely focus on one medium (such as television or film);

¹⁴ For Parekh (1993), political obligation is a category distinct from both civil and legal obligation, and is concerned with such things as taking an interest in political life, promoting the well-being of one's community and helping redress its injustices.

one class (such as electronic or print); or one scale of media (such as mass or specialized, "demassified" information sources). However, since different classes and scales of a variety of media clearly inform - and indeed are partly constitutive of - different historical periods, these logically demand more attention than do others. This study will concentrate on the press and broadcasting apparatuses, for, as John Hargreaves observes, of the media's different facets ". . . it is these institutions, rather than the cinema, book publishing etc. that are in more or less instantaneous, continuous touch with the majority of the population".¹⁵

Communication and information media, it must be noted, are not "alien technologies".¹⁶ Rather, as Jensen points out, they are ". . . human-made forms that are designed to be of cultural significance. The media are made-to-mean, both in their form and content, as part of a more general social and cultural process of living in the world. They are not outside forces, they are not contrary in their influence, and they are not, intrinsically, corrupt or corrupting".¹⁷

This study therefore repudiates totalizing statements about the "inherent" nature of certain forms of communications (of which Marshall McLuhan's "The Medium is the Message" thesis is a classic formulation). Instead, it conceives of media power as "cultural connectedness" - as forms of connections between people, as the means by which social groups "tell the world". Media structures and practices are, in other words, contingent instances within more general social determinations, and their fundamental patterns are neither natural nor inevitable.¹⁸ As with all

¹⁵ Hargreaves, J., (1994 : 154)

¹⁶ As Kevin Robins and Frank Webster (1990 : 157) observe : "The presumption that technology is neutral - and thereby that it is in crucial ways asocial - is anathema to everything the social sciences and humanities stands for. It unavoidably makes them secondary, as disciplines, to science and technology because it relegates their roles to study the effects of technological innovations which are presumed to be the major motor of change."

¹⁷ Jensen, J., (1990 : 179)

¹⁸ Referring to audiovisual technologies, Hayward and Wollen (1993 : 2) argue that while the introduction of each new technology to existing communication systems is based ostensibly on its right of succession to an older form deemed compara-

technologies, the social - values, feelings, beliefs and morals - is present in communication technologies from the point of origination to the point of application. Thus, rather than viewing such media in isolation, it is imperative that we recognize that their influence is highly dependant on a complex set of cultural, economic and sociopolitical factors.

Social change does not occur through ideal forms such as art, information or education, but is always conditioned by the social possibilities opened up through participatory, pluralistic conversation.¹⁹ Communication and information technologies are thus extremely important forms of connections, offering as they do both opportunities and constraints on the "right to narrate" (Gadamer) so fundamental to democratic social relations. However, as agents of social change and behaviour, the mass media are always historical examples of a range of institutional means by which, in any society, symbolic forms and the meanings they create and carry, are produced, distributed and consumed. In other words, the mass media are *aspects* of cultural systems and of social life. Thus, while recognizing that the mass media are certainly partly constitutive of such forms of social life, it would be a theoretical error to assume their *a priori* importance over other forms and cast them as a privileged - let alone a self-sufficient - object of analysis.

Central to the broader theoretical and historical concerns in conjunction with which the mass media need to be analysed, are questions and debates concerning the balance of social power; the nature of social and cultural structures; and in particular, the effectiveness of symbolic forms in the maintenance or change of those structures. In identifying the mass media as relatively autonomous signifying systems situated within an always

tively inefficient, it would be wrong to continue to consider these technologies as self-activated energies somehow independent of specific economic systems. In late capitalism, they maintain, it is market aspirations which determine product development and succession rather than any evolutionary instinct within technology". (1993 : 3)
¹⁹ Jensen, J., (1990 : 183)

historically specific cultural totality and dynamic, this study seeks to link together the political-economic and the ideological (or textual) approaches to cultural and media forms.²⁰ For while the signifying systems of the mass communications establishment undoubtedly have a considerable degree of social determination, to argue their embedded institutionalized power is intellectually inadequate. For one, it relies on a one-way mechanistic epistemological model of causation (rather than mutual causation); secondly, it relies on narrowly empiricist and behaviourist notions of people and cultural institutions.

We do need to account for the ideological and political dimensions of human existence, for these have a relative autonomy and their own distinctive properties, such that any putative dependence on the "base" (to use the crude Marxian term) must be considered a highly complex and mediated one. However, we cannot adequately understand contemporary cultural forms unless we undertake a study of the "political economy" of the commodity form. As Nicholas Garnham argues, concrete cultural transformations can only be understood as part of the analysis of the capitalist mode of production, if only because so much of our culture is produced and consumed in the form of commodities by profit-seeking institutions.²¹

The task at hand is therefore to link recent work in cultural and media theory with current debates within social and political theory. A thorough insight into the logic and configuration of social institutions and power

²⁰ The *political economy approach* to cultural forms is typified by a concern to register the underlying dynamics of development in the cultural sphere in general which rest firmly and increasingly upon the logic of generalized commodity production. A political economy of the media is therefore concerned with the industrialization of the superstructure, and argues that cultural forms rest upon ultimate determination by the economic. The *ideological or textual approach*, on the other hand, seeks to demonstrate the relative autonomy and specificity of symbolic structures and processes of meaning production. This approach involves a widening of the meaning of language so as to connect linguistic forms (that is, symbolic structures) with the study of social structures, processes and behaviour.

²¹ Garnham, N., (1986c : 31)

relations in modern "informationalizing"²² societies is imperative in rendering our understanding of the contemporary production and consumption of media forms adequate to our central theoretical concern of reviving the concept of the public sphere.

II.

The driving explanatory dialectic of this study reflects the tension within the dominant culture and the ambiguity of the communications media which operate therein. For the study casts the latter as being both technologies of control and instruments of potential liberation. In terms of its place within modern culture, new technology is therefore seen as being fundamentally two-faced. As David Lyon observes, new technology is a ". . . noble human activity on the one hand, but derailed and distorted by human waywardness, on the other", and he further warns that if we see only one face or the other, ". . . we are in danger of demonizing or deifying technology, of being either technophobes or technofreaks." This, Lyon argues, is the ". . . ambiguity in which our action is set."²³

Taking this ambiguity to heart, this study seeks to move beyond the simple dichotomy of "pastorals of progress" or grim narratives of power and domination. It endeavours, that is to say, to separate the "positives" from the "negatives", to understand where each originates, assess their respective consequences and to consider alternatives. The task, according to Michael Real, is to ". . . consciously see through the web of imagery and information overload by developing a sense of what super media can do well and do

²² Danilo Zolo (1992 : 13-4; fn.14) sees the "informationalizing" of society proceeding by way of three technological developments : *robotics*, which deals with the automization of the industrial process and social services ; *telematics*, which deals with the electronic filing and transmitting of data ; and *mass-media communication*, which principally concerns communication via television.

²³ Lyon, D. (1986 : 115)

poorly, how they inspire and how they distort - only then can we conduct our lives as fully self-conscious, self-directed human beings".²⁴

As David Tetzlaff observes, the future is unwritten, there are no political guarantees, and structures of social injustice will not crumble by themselves - we have to take them apart. We can therefore not be content with the position of so-called "vulgar" Marxism, which remains secure in its faith that "... liberation is written into the dialectical progress of history, that it is only a matter of time before capitalism crumbles under the weight of its own economic contradictions". We must also firmly eschew the assertions of more fashionable deterministic utopias, in which "... the inevitable indeterminacy of language and/or the necessarily open character of textuality stand ready to sunder the semic pillars of the temple of social authority".²⁵

If we are to have any hope of engaging in socially redemptive political action²⁶, we need to understand how the system of domination preserves us, and how social order and social control are maintained. We need, in other words, to understand the ideological mechanisms through which the media contribute to the maintenance of the system, as well as those through

²⁴ Real, M. (1989 : 40) The distinctive feature of these "super-media", according to Real, is the way in which they saturate all our communicative interactions. Quantitatively, he argues, they change the way consciousness, identity and connectedness emerge and operate today, for such media do not simply present cultural products for consumption, but actually provide much of the "stuff" of everyday life through which we construct meaning and organize our existence.

²⁵ Tetzlaff, D. (1991 : 9)

²⁶ By "*socially redemptive*" political action I mean political action inspired by the Enlightenment goal of emancipation from the constraints of repression, and directed towards establishing social organizations that reach beyond the exploitative economic relations and the alienating and often destructive technological cultural patterns associated with the capitalist mode of production. "Socially redemptive" is here taken to be closer to Habermas's "normative critique" than to the "utopian tranformation" insisted upon by the earlier critical theorists. For rather than involving "immature" antimodernist romanticism and totalitarian leanings towards total social reconstruction, and the opening up of utopian potential as a condition for emancipation, a "*socially redemptive*" politics is directed towards completing the "unfulfilled potentials" of modernity. That is to say, it involves a "mature" realism towards attainable objectives and plural democratic politics, fulfilling what is promised by the official values of society, such as gender equality and real (as opposed to merely formal) participation in the decision-making structures of society.

which meaningful resistance can develop. This study therefore has two analytical concerns. Firstly, at the macro-level of structures, it points to changing institutional configurations which suggest the possibility of altered social relations of power. Particularly relevant in this respect is the development of public communications leading up to the current availability of electronic information and communication technology to consumers. The second analytical concern of this study is at the micro-level, where it explores the social and cultural practices (such as social interaction and media decoding) involved in the active and equivocal process of sense-making in daily life. The contention is that this process exhibits a greater degree of "free play" in relation to the systemic character of social structure and ideology than is assumed by those commentators who see only a highly mediatized social, political, and cultural landscape in which virtually everything becomes integrated into the logic of commodification. In short, the point this study tries to make is that opportunities for local cultural affirmation can be found using the very materials that threaten to eradicate it.

Communications research into the mediatization of social life has traditionally focused on such "classical" mass media as newspapers, radio and television. By comparison there has been comparatively little sustained theoretical investigation into the long-term cognitive, emotional and behavioural effects of the newer, "demassified" technologies of video, direct broadcast satellite (DBS) and personal computers. This is unfortunate, for it is the contention of this study that the fate of democracy in complex, "informationalizing" societies depends not only on a better understanding of how communication works, but also on the exploitation of these new communication and information technologies. Just as the television instituted a "new modality and tempo of experience"²⁷, so too will the new technologies of the current "communication revolution" have a profound impact on symbolic environments and political systems. However, as Hamid

²⁷ Gouldner, A.W. (1976 : 169)

Mowlana maintains, the *real* "communication revolution" is less about the spread of technology, systems innovation and the massive increase in the speed and quantity of messages than it is about the quest for "satisfactory human interaction".²⁸

This is not to suggest, however, that new information and communications media are not capable of further extending the interests of the state and corporate capital which, through enhanced technologies of control and surveillance threaten the very fibre of democratic public life in late capitalist societies.²⁹ Rather, the contention is simply that such technologies can *also* serve as instruments of liberation and, if properly conceived and legitimately used, can improve citizens' access to the public information necessary for meaningful participation in decision-making processes.

Modern means of communication are the dominant institutions of the contemporary public sphere, the frame of reference in which identities are formed, and in which personal lives and experiences connect to public activities and concerns. As Michael Real puts it, mass media are the "... tribal campfire around which the human race celebrates its common heroes, triumphs, defeats, myths, values, and hopes"³⁰. However, while the mass

²⁸ Mowlana, H. (1997 : 218)

²⁹ Even those with no personal access to computers find their lives computer-recorded by schools, police, banks, employers, licensing agencies, and countless nameless others, with such "transactional information" being readily available to commercial interests. In the United States, for instance, 10 000 merchants from all over the country can obtain a summary fact sheet on any one of 86 million American citizens in three to four seconds [David Durnham, The Rise of the Computer State, (1984 : 33-4), cited Lyon, D. (1989 : 100)]

As Poster (1990 : 97) argues, this use of databases - a Foucaultian "Superpanopticon" - does not so much involve an invasion of privacy, a threat to a centered individual, as it does the "... multiplication of the individual, the constitution of an additional self, one that may be acted upon to the detriment of the 'real self' without that 'real' self ever being aware of what is happening". The truly frightening aspect of this new means of control, in which individuals are constituted as consumers - and the "dangerous classes" of the nineteenth century replaced by "... a fashion-conscious, intelligent, educated and well-behaved populace" - is that individuals actually participate in the disciplining and surveillance of themselves as consumers - by filling in their own forms, with each transaction recorded, encoded and added to databases. (1990 : 93)

³⁰ Real, M. (1989 : 15)

media environment provides the interpretive framework through which audiences generate meaning, one ought not to take for granted the homogeneity or “compactness” of the communications sector, nor the monolithic character of the state-capital power-nexus. Indeed, this paper argues that it would be misleading to suggest that the world is undergoing increasing cultural homogenization consequent on the standardization of international markets, the increasing density and power of communication, global computer networks, etc. As Larry Ray observes, “. . . it would be mistaken to imagine that the spread of fast food outlets or satellite television, superficially ‘globalized’ consumption cultures, indicates increasing world integration in structural terms.”³¹ This study therefore further suggests that structural changes point to new conditioning dynamics and possibilities pulling the modern public sphere in as yet largely uncharted directions, and that much can be gained from the perspective of democratic participation in exploring the information channels of new media alternatives.

This is Tim Luke’s contention when he argues that once alternative media have been effectively structured around the creation of new sites and spaces, relatively free from the mass media’s marketing imperatives, emancipatory alternatives to the more commodified cultural forms prevailing in everyday life could be openly discussed. Alternative media, that is to say, could then be employed to “. . . foster critical styles of expression, construct alternative modes of social identity, or concretize new critical communities of action, practice and analysis”.³²

³¹ Ray, L.J. (1993 : xviii)

³² Luke, T. (1989 : 241)

New technologies, in other words, could well serve as the means by which critical sectors of society can, as Gouldner (1976 : 178) urges “. . . exploit the contradictions of the consciousness industry that dispose it to publicize any cultural outlook that helps maintain its profitability”.

If, as Martin Heidegger claims, "mankind is a conversation",³³ then the hermeneutic objective must be to extend this human conversation to incorporate into our world other actors tending other dramas by comprehending what they are saying. The task, in other words, is to promote the inclusion of alternative conceptions, forms of expression and social relation into the communicative practices by which reality is constituted (denied, transformed and/or celebrated). One could be sceptical and argue that just the opposite dynamic is evident, in so far as one of the most striking features of the contemporary age appears to be the emergence of a relatively consistent single, transnational lifestyle, associated with transnational corporations, information flows, products, commercials and media. However, contrary to this apocalyptic opinion, such a "mass culture" of uniform behaviour, feelings, and systems of opinions cannot be said to exist. As Umberto Eco has pointed out, far from being a uniform or static phenomenon, the model of mass culture competes with other models (constituted by historic vestiges, class culture, aspects of high culture transmitted through education etc) and within the interstices of the mass media and socio-economic developments, mass culture is always in a constant state of flux.³⁴

The mass media do not have the ideological power ascribed to them by the Frankfurt School "tragi-historians" or "postmodern McLuhanites".³⁵ Neither the mass media's form nor its content automatically convert recipients into narcotic passiveness. Rather than a particular discursive convention or textual typology being always and ever dominant, recipients have a residual freedom to read messages in different ways and to decode the overall forms of discourse with what Fabbri calls their particular

³³ According to Heidegger (1968 : 277) "... the being of man is found in language ... by which mankind continually produces and contemplates itself, a reflection of our species being".

³⁴ Eco, U. (1994 : 97-8)

³⁵ The image of convergence is of the mass media being a new ideology, rather than simply transmitting ideology. Within this conceptualization, messages are seen to be less important than the serial communications environment of simultaneous channels, gradually and uniformly bombarding recipients with information, such that contents are levelled and lose their difference.

“discursive pidginization”.³⁶ As Umberto Eco maintains, “. . . variability of interpretation is the constant law of mass communication”.³⁷ Thus, rather than simply presenting cultural products (meanings) for consumption, the mass media produce a “repertoire” of cultural resources which individuals and groups actively utilize in their own processes of cultural production and on the basis of which they construct meaning and organize existence.

We must not, however, be misled by notions of technological autonomy, nor be blinkered by reflections on the discursive “openness” of the ideological field. Technological innovations and changes in the fields of communications and informational infrastructure will no doubt have vast implications for the organization of work, the economy, the roles which people are to play in society and their relationship to the cultural and political processes of that society. It is therefore imperative that we examine more than just the technology *per se*, and consider the *political economy* in which such technology is being developed. As Philip Elliott writes, we need “. . . to consider what type of organizations and corporations are associated with the present range of media provision and with which the new technologies that are likely to be introduced, what interests they are likely to pursue, consciously and unconsciously, and the type of social and political structures that they are likely to both promote and reflect”.³⁸

In other words, if we are to adequately understand the significance, scale and meaning of the present mutation within the so-called “culture industries”³⁹, we need to reinstate the concept of totality⁴⁰ so as to properly

³⁶ ‘Pidgin’, as constituted by colonial and colonized language as the result of processes of simplification, adaption, elimination and interference ; see Eco, U. (1994 : 98-9)

³⁷ Eco, U. (1987 : 141)

³⁸ Elliott, P. (1986 : 106)

³⁹ The “culture industry” basically refers to that process which has resulted in the increasing commodification of cultural forms brought about by the rise of entertainment in the USA and Europe. The thrust of the study, initiated by Horkheimer and Adorno, was to rethink the nature and impact of ideology in relation to the development of mass communication, and was especially influenced by the theme of the societal rationalization of cultural forms - a process

locate contemporary developments in the media environment within their proper social and historical context - that is, within the historical trajectory of the pursuit of capital accumulation and obstacles placed in the way of this endeavour. For as Robins and Webster maintain, what is widely heralded as a "communications revolution" is really part and parcel of a wider restructuring of society and social relations, and cannot be seen apart from the "... fundamental restructuring and recomposition of the industrial landscape and consequently, of the existing pattern of capital accumulation".⁴¹

Situating the "heartland technologies"⁴² of electronic information and communication media within a Foucaultian understanding of power is particularly instructive in this regard, for it highlights the way in which capital seeks to influence not only ideas and profits, but also the "... very rhythms, patterns, pace, texture, and disciplines of everyday life".⁴³ With the communication revolution changing more than just entertainment and leisure pursuits and potentially impacting profoundly on *all* spheres of society, the fairly substantive notions of historicity underpinning Foucaultian discourse-power theory provide us with useful analytical tools for tracing the constraining operations of impersonal social power, and understanding the way in which these power formations emerge as "... a slowly spreading net of normalization which invades our language, our institutions, and even (and especially) our consciousness of ourselves as subjects", persistently channeling activity and pointing out which direction is normal.⁴⁴

which purportedly atrophied the capacity of the individual to think and act in a critical and autonomous way.

⁴⁰

Jay, M. (1984).

⁴¹

Robins, K. & Webster, F. (1988 : 47)

⁴²

Lyon, D. (1986 : 16) uses this term to express the idea that so few areas are immune to their impact, which extends from work (robotics and office technology), to political management and policing and military activities (electronic warfare), to communication and consumption (electronic funds transfers and retail technology).

⁴³

Robins, K. & Webster, F. (1988 : 46)

⁴⁴

White, S. (1989)

As Ariel Dorfman observes of the media : "We are not only taught certain styles of violence, the latest fashions, and sex roles by television, movies, magazines, and comic strips ; we are also taught how to succeed, how to love, how to buy, how to conquer, how to forget the past and suppress the future. We are taught, more than anything else, how not to rebel".⁴⁵

Discourses of power, in other words, operate (initially unnoticed) on the social terrain of "everyday life" in which particular social relations are constituted.⁴⁶ Ideology - understood as "meaning in the service of power"⁴⁷ - can therefore not be thought of solely or even primarily in relation to the forms of power that are institutionalized in the modern state. As Thompson writes : "For most people, the relations of power and domination which affect them most directly are those characteristic of the social contexts within which they live out their everyday lives : the home, the workplace, the classroom, the peer group. These are the contexts within which individuals spend the bulk of their time, acting and interacting, speaking and listening, pursuing their aims and following the aims of others."⁴⁸

Power, then, is present in the most delicate mechanisms of social exchange; not only in the State, in classes and in groups, but more insidiously ". . . in fashion, public opinion, entertainment, sports, news, information, family, and private relations, and even in the liberating impulses which attempt to counteract it."⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Ariel Dorfman, (1983), The Empire's New Clothes : What the Lone Ranger, Babar, and Other Innocent Heroes Do to Our Minds, (New York : Pantheon Books), cited Bruck, P.A. & Raboy, M. (1989 : 13)

⁴⁶ Discourse, following Foucault (1972) comprises an intermediate level of meaning production between individual texts and culture as a whole, and carries with it certain dominant registers or worldviews.

⁴⁷ Thompson, J.B. (1990 : 7)

⁴⁸ Thompson, J.B. (1990 : 9)

⁴⁹ Michel Foucault, cited in Eco, U. (1987 : 240)

III.

This study will begin with an account of the public sphere as first formulated by Jurgen Habermas. Because the historical analysis in Habermas's The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere emanates from the neo-Marxist Frankfurt School tradition of Critical Theory, this tradition provides much of intellectual specificity and critical methodology, as well as the historical concreteness and political angle of vision for this study.⁵⁰

Habermas's early work on the public sphere provided some positive moments *vis-a-vis* the resigned pessimism of the Frankfurt School's "founding fathers". Such works of the School's first generation theorists were inspired by a political vision which included the fracturing of the dialectic of history - the mutually interactive relationship between the subject (human agents) and the object (the social conditions of their existence) - and the complete social stasis in conditions which, according to Adorno, were little short of hell.⁵¹ Seeking to explain the mechanisms of ideological containment by which corporate capital and the state successfully integrated the working class into a system of domination, these theorists severed their connections with Marxism, and sought their answers on the "subject" rather than the "object" side of the equation. Based on a critique of instrumental reason, the culture industry, and the psycho-social formation of individual subjectivity, their argument was that the consciousness of the need for radical social change had been eliminated, yielding "... an ideological climate in which the prospect of a horizon

⁵⁰ The "Frankfurt School" label applies to the collective thought of those theorists - most notably, Theodore Adorno, Herbert Marcuse and Max Horkheimer - associated with the Institute for Social Research founded in Frankfurt in 1923, but which, upon the ascension of Hitler to the German chancellorship in 1933, moved to New York where, until 1942, it was affiliated to the Sociology Department of the University of Columbia. In 1948, Max Horkheimer (director since 1930) led the Institute back to Frankfurt - although Marcuse chose to remain in California.

⁵¹ Bennett, T. (1992a : 42)

beyond the limits constituted by the present had been virtually lobotomized".⁵²

Habermas, on the other hand, despite lamenting the commercial media's power to manipulate audiences, manages to find a potentially liberating power that was quite absent from the analyses of his predecessors.⁵³ Thus, whereas Lukacs, Adorno and Horkheimer's "hatred of bourgeois institutions" and their peculiar brand of Marxist orthodoxy led them to political economy, commodification of the world and cultural critique, Habermas "fresh analysis" of civil society and the state spared him, as Cohen observes, the "old" Frankfurt School's need to accept a "romanticized absolute subject" (the proletariat) or an "absolute spirit" (art) as the bearer of reason and reconciliation.⁵⁴ This "fresh analysis" was his social-historical analysis of the public sphere as a crucial site for the self-formative processes of individual and groups, mediating between major blocs of institutions. According to Cohen, this provided Habermas with the basis for both an alternative to the resigned political conclusions of Adorno and Horkheimer, and an important corrective to his own analysis of late capitalism.

The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere perhaps remains the best modern representation of the public sphere, offering as it does ". . . a sustained treatment of concrete practices and institutions of communication".⁵⁵ However, this study argues that Habermas's "refeudalization" thesis and his general antipathy towards the new communications media demonstrate both a paralysing theoretical indebtedness to the earlier work of the Frankfurt School, and a conceptually inadequate analytical framework for understanding the nature of the electronic media that are central to contemporary public life.

⁵² Bennett, T. (1992a : 42)
⁵³ Peters, J.D. (1993 : 541)
⁵⁴ Cohen, J. (1979 : 73)
⁵⁵ Peters, J.D. (1993 : 542)

Moreover, Habermas appears to have been persuaded by his pessimistic account of late capitalism to abandon his historically specific and social institutional strategy, seeing no bases for progress in social institutions as such. As a result, his later work effectively sidesteps radical analysis in favour of an elaborate and (arguably) overly rational “communication theory” of social interaction, leading to mainstream accounts of philosophical idealism and hyperfactual social science. Thus, despite his celebrated “linguistic turn”, his subsequent work in search of a less historical and transcendental basis for democracy proves to be too abstract and formal. For in steering clear of the material and contingent aspects of human existence, Habermas’s later work fails to adequately explore the changing and historically conditioned patterns of signification, ideology and power.

This study, in other words, does not hold Habermas’s evaluation to be definitive. As shall be clearly illustrated in Chapter Two, not only are there certain conceptual ambiguities and methodological flaws in his argument, but Habermas’s conclusions may be considered unduely pessimistic. To quote Dahlgren, Habermas “. . . doubly overstates his case, that the discourse of the bourgeois public sphere even at its zenith never manifested the high level of reasoned discourse he suggests, and that the situation under advanced capitalism - dismal as it may be - is not as bleak and locked as he asserts”.⁵⁶

This position results mainly from Habermas’s underdevelopment or omission of significant issues, such as culture and identity - the “world-disclosing” role of the public sphere - and the category of agency and the struggles by which both the public sphere and its participants are actively made and remade. Significantly, as Calhoun points out, Habermas almost completely neglects to analyse the internal organization of the public sphere : the first half of the work doesn’t even address power relations,

⁵⁶ Dahlgren, P. & Sparks, C. (1993 : 5)

networks of communication, the topography of issues, and structures of influence; whereas the second half only addresses these themes and dynamics in order to account for the public sphere's degeneration.⁵⁷

Thus, after exploring some of the false historical presuppositions of Habermas's argument, his thesis of the degeneration and refeudalization of the public sphere will be critically analysed. Specific attention will be given to his exaggeration of the passivity of individuals, and the fact that he takes too much for granted concerning the process of reception, which needs a more contextualized and hermeneutically sensitive approach to demonstrate the process's more complicated and creative nature.⁵⁸

Significantly, Habermas failed to recognize that new forms of social interaction and the diffusion of information via electronic communication media are organized on a scale, and in a manner, entirely different to the past - different, that is, to the theatrical practices of feudal courts. This seriously compromises his thesis of refeudalization. Perhaps more significant, though, is Habermas' refusal to move away from a conception of communications as occurring within localized, face-to-face, dialogical settings. Such a model, it will be argued, proves conceptually and theoretically incapable of exploring the ways in which electronically-mediated consumption communities have redefined and, in some instances, actually expanded the public sphere in contemporary "high-tech" societies.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Calhoun, C. (1993 : 38)

⁵⁸ Habermas, J., in Calhoun, C. (1993 : 438), later admitted that his "... diagnosis of a unilinear development from a politically active public to one withdrawn into a bad publicity, from a 'culture-debating to a culture-consuming public', is too simplistic. At the same time I was too pessimistic about the resisting power and above all the critical potential of a pluralistic, internally more differentiated mass public whose cultural usages have begun to shake off the constraints of class".

⁵⁹ J.B. Thompson (1990 : 266-7) maintains that the electronic media not only enable symbolic forms to be circulated on an unprecedented scale, to reach vast audiences, far-flung in space, more or less contemporaneously, but they also modify this large and broader audience's modes of access to the production and reception of symbolic forms. Thus, in terms of the reception of television messages, this is largely due to the fact that the TV has become a domestic appliance with a central position in the home, and the focal point around which much social interaction takes place. In addition, the skills required to decode such messages are often less sophisticated, and involve less specialized training

Habermas's original model of the public sphere was one of democratic debate, political discussion and the writing and discussion of newspapers, journals, pamphlets and books, and he displayed an iconolastic distrust of representational forms.⁶⁰ The resulting theoretical model of communication proves ill-suited for exploring the generalized context of electronic communication and information systems, and for analysing the way in which computer and telecommunication technologies have caused conventional codes of power, ideology and resistance to change.⁶¹ Thus, while new regions and sites of shared cultural consciousness are emerging, models of communication and notions of public life similar to Habermas's prove incapable of grasping the true natures of either the mass communications environment or its de-massified successor. This is unfortunate, for from a democratic point of view there are encouraging signs emerging from this completely new dimension of social interaction and activism on the micro-level, with the "meshed networks" of open spaces being potentially capable of bypassing statist controllers or consumer / capitalist intermediaries.⁶²

than those required to decode messages transmitted by other media such as printed matter.

⁶⁰ Habermas's principled preference for "serious talk" between intimate equals as opposed to what he perceived to be the shallow and empty gloss of popular representational forms - both courtly (feudal) and televisual (modern) - is somewhat reminiscent of Rousseau's abhorrence of the underlying artifice of the theatrical practices of his day.

⁶¹ Until recently, as Gouldner (1976 : 167-8) points out, the fundamental means of ideology has been conceptual and linguistic (printed matter). "Ideology", he writes, "... was diffused via a relatively highly educated reading elite and spread to a larger public through written interpretations of 'popularizations' of the ideology in newspapers, magazines, pamphlets, or leaflets, and through face-to-face oral communication in conversations, coffee shops, class rooms, lecture halls, or mass meetings." However, this "two-step model of communication - in which ideological information is "filtered down" to mass audiences by the media, and especially through a mediating intelligentsia - can no longer be sustained, for, as Gouldner argues, "... modern communication media have greatly intensified the non-linguistic and iconic aspect, and hence the *multimodal* character of public communications".

⁶² Bruck, P.A. & Raboy, M. (1989 : 8)
The Internet is the classic example, providing as it does essential elements missing from traditional mass media - information, feedback, context and a highly literate community of participants. It has been widely argued that in being liberated from controlled content by uncensored mass communications and offering near-instantaneous access to primary sources of news, the Internet challenges broadcast media's monopoly of thought.

IV.

Clearly, if we are to retain the analytical efficacy of the notion of the public sphere and continue to promote its normative principles as the yardstick by which to measure democratic theory and practice, a methodological and theoretical shift away from the strictures of Habermas's later work is necessary. A broader analytical perspective is required if we are to come to grips with the thematic importance of communication media, appreciate their structuring impact on social and political life, and understand at the micro-level the conditions of citizen involvement with the public sphere. As Dahlgren points out, to properly understand the limits and possibilities of meaning production and circulation, one needs to pursue the critique of ideology at a deeper level of signification, moving beyond static ideas of both the "rational man" and the putatively unlimited polysemy in the "media-audience interface".⁶³ What is needed to lay bare the symbolic-ideological logic organizing late capitalist society is a more critical hermeneutic, one better suited to penetrating the mediated social context of generating and interpreting knowledge. Such a hermeneutical approach will aim at reaching a better understanding of the dynamics of meaning - investigating *how* ideology legitimizes, dissimulates and reifies domination, and *how* individuals engage in the ongoing, active, and intersubjective process of meaning creation in a context defined for the most part by electronic information and communication technologies.

To this end, new intellectual and political horizons will be explored, including Marxist debates in and around the area of ideology, structural-semiotics, political economy, and "postmodern" modes of thought in general. All of these are explored in terms of the perspectives they offer on the complexities and contradictions of meaning production, on the concrete social settings in the evolving institutional nexus, and on the cultural and symbolic resources at work in the diffuse and textured structures of everyday life. Given the centrality of communication systems (especially

⁶³ Dahlgren, P. & Sparks, C. (1993 : 5)

those based around the commercially operated organs of mass communication) and the role of public representations as the necessary "mediating fictions" by which we live and represent our collective lives, the production and consumption of their symbolic practices form the logical centre of this study's analysis.

A crucial analytical step in this regard is to recognize that structures of domination are linguistically based, and that we need to critically explore language at the level of constituted social field. Language is more than just a co-ordinating tool for acting subjects; beyond being important to their positional intentions within concrete institutional settings, language also performs a fundamental "world-disclosing" role. Thus while linguistically mediated processes such as the attainment of knowledge, identity formation, socialization and social integration allow individuals to master problems within the world, language is also capable of loosening our world's hold upon us by confronting us with the ways in which it is structured by unrecognized or willfully forgotten fictions. New language formations, then, as embodied in new electronic communication and information media, can therefore alter networks of social relations, the subjects they constitute, and the ways in which these subjects process signs into meaning.

This investigation will draw from both structuralist and post-structuralist perspectives. The latter's stress on the pre-eminence of the signifier over the signified - which construes meaning to be the product of signifying practices internal to language or other semiotic orders, rather than a connection between signs and the world - has an obvious relevance in our media-defined world of non-verbal imagery. Indeed, as Mark Poster asserts, poststructuralism is the most suitable theoretical approach for the analysis of a culture "saturated by the particular linguisticity of electronic media".⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Poster, M. (1990 : 82)

The poststructuralist attribution to cultural signs of a high degree of autonomy and detachment in the signification process feeds into contemporary debates about “post-modernism”, and here the theoretical appeal is great to accord the media (to the exclusion of other constitutive elements) an all-powerful role in the constitution of “hyper-reality” and in the structuring of social experience.

In the age of images, postmodern politics takes cultural signs to be active agents, “. . . creating and evoking new substances, new social forces, new ways of acting and thinking, new attitudes, reshuffling the cards of ‘fate’, and ‘nature’ and ‘social life’.”⁶⁵ Postmodern, in other words, questions the determining power of material reality, and calls into question all claims to substantive grounds outside representation. Political institutions, moral norms, social practices and economic structures are therefore seen as contingent - “malleable shapes, particular dispositions of mouldable elements” - and are discredited as having no absolute ground in ‘reality’.⁶⁶ While, as Michael Ryan notes, this questioning of the substance of reality is no doubt a “troubling, and obviously frightening philosophical possibility”, it is also “. . . an important political opening that deprives those in social power of the grounds (material necessity, social reality) for imposing austerity, efficiency and subordination on the large majority of people”.⁶⁷

Similarly, Paul Wapner maintains that in taking the notion of social construction seriously, and in holding human beings and all objects alike to be social constructs, postmodernist thought “. . . delegitimizes social institutions and practices by severing any seeming connection they may appear to have with something suprahuman, something essential or fundamental, like god, nature, logos rationality, etc.”⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Ryan, M. (1988 : 560)

⁶⁶ Ryan, M. (1988 : 575)

⁶⁷ Ryan, M. (1988 : 562)

⁶⁸ Wapner, P. (1989 : 57)

However, despite stressing the contingent, malleable and unpredictable nature of social reality, most forms of postmodernist thought focus almost exclusively on ephemeral cultural forms (consumption, fashion, style, chic etc), and fastidiously avoid exploring the material structures of domination.⁶⁹ Consequently, its politics never adequately addresses what *kinds* of resistance (and under what conditions) are possible to power. For not only is no countervision offered from which to criticize the status quo and towards which to orient social change, but society is seen as layers of Chinese boxes, building on each other but disclosing nothing in the centre. As Wapner observes, there is nothing underneath the layers, and specifically, no human being under the discourses - thus no human being to save, emancipate, protect, liberate. Thus, with no recipient or *raison d'être* of political transformation, there is no direction or even reason to engage in social change.⁷⁰

The current postmodern theme is one of a breakdown in signification, in which audiences are no longer understood as being capable of engaging mass-produced culture on the level of ideology, myth, or even pragmatic formation. As Michael Ryan writes, ". . . stable positions of power or of discourse can no longer be determined ; all is merely a vertigo of interpretation".⁷¹ Derrida and Foucault, for instance, turn the "end of the individual" theme into a praise; while in the cultural sphere, the postmodern sensibility tends to fetishize and promote a collapse of the boundaries between art and life to the detriment of both spheres. Jean Baudrillard's characterization of our age as one enlivened by a simulacrum which denies, not reality, but the *difference* between the image and the real, is particularly exacting in this regard.

For Baudrillard, there is no "reality" separate from media symbols. Our realities, he contends, are to be found in the communicative exchanges of

⁶⁹ Ray, L. (1993 : xii)
⁷⁰ Wapner, P. (1989 : 59)
⁷¹ Ryan, M. (1988 : 565)

imagery and information that the media create. Reality is therefore nothing but a series of simulated perspectives - ". . . a constantly circulating play of representations"⁷² - and anything with pretensions to be otherwise is inferior, because produced, and therefore self-limiting, fated to be seduced by the irreversibility that haunts it. In this media-saturated environment, experience is fragmented by a plurality of values and contexts of action, rendering notions of politics, history, ideology and truth obsolete. For Baudrillard, humankind has ceased to be the measure of all things. The subject has disappeared, and meaning has imploded in an endless and incoherent play of difference. Value expands endlessly and horizontally, no longer an endpoint but the means of circulation (usually in the form of desire), and it no longer serves as a reference point. Critical self-understanding thereby becomes impossible, and the subject is rendered irrelevant and trivial, no longer a tragic figure, but rather a farcical one, unable to understand (let alone control) the forces that have penetrated and dispersed the body. In Baudrillard's world of the "hyper-real", then, all references to finalities or ontologies have become superfluous.

While Baudrillard's political philosophy overextends itself - insofar as he confuses tendencies with a finalized state of affairs, and fails to define a meaningful politics of resistance - there is much to be gained from his distinctive brand of post-structuralism, and we cannot dismiss his work outright. For one, there are sufficient grounds to identify with the claim that technologies can structure consciousness and the self-identity of individuals and groups. Another useful avenue of exploration would be to dispense with the idea of a single hegemonic code of "bourgeois ideology", and see the problem (of ideology) in terms of a proliferation of codes. The concern then becomes how this proliferation is structured; which cognitive and behavioural scripts are privileged; and which segments of society are systematically advantaged or disadvantaged in the process.

⁷² Ryan, M. (1988 : 566)

Unfortunately, Baudrillard totalizes his semantic code and effectively robs his analysis of a subjective point of entry. On his understanding, the logic of “hypercapitalism” is beyond rational will. “Things have found a way of avoiding a dialectics of meanings that was beginning to bore them”, he writes, “. . . by proliferating indefinitely, increasing their potential, outbidding themselves in an ascension to the limits, an obscenity that henceforth becomes their immanent finality and senseless reason.”⁷³ In Baudrillard’s opinion, the human species has “. . . crossed some specific, mysterious point, from which it is impossible to retreat, decelerate, or slow down”, and now exists in the “dead-point” of non-contradiction, exalted contemplation and ecstasy.⁷⁴ This coma-like state is the era of the “transpolitical”, the era of the “anomaly”, in which aberrations are of no consequence and are “. . . on the order of a pure and simple apparition”, rising to the surface of the system as if from another system.⁷⁵

Postmodernism of this kind quite blatantly turns its back on the modernist projects of progress and rational coherence, and disputes the possibility of an active and critical mode of social engagement. The net result of these tendencies, Tetzlaff claims, is a flat and affirmative universe of aesthetic discourse, in which the critical capacities of an autonomous art have been relinquished in favour of a pseudo-democratic, ephemeral emphasis on the sheer immediacy of experience. From the postmodern perspective, he writes, “. . . cultural consumption is viewed as centering on a fascination with the spectacular surfaces of media forms, the play of ever proliferating and intermingling signs and images disconnected from their meanings”.⁷⁶

This view is somewhat problematic, however, for it sidesteps the issue of how mass-produced culture figures in capitalist control. Moreover,

⁷³ Baudrillard, J. (1990 : 7)
⁷⁴ Baudrillard, J. (1990 : 13-14)
⁷⁵ Baudrillard, J. (1990 : 26)
⁷⁶ Tetzlaff, D. (1991 : 11)

by simply pasting the same old concept of control on the new version of the media, it endorses the blankness or semiotic chaos it finds in media products and their reception.⁷⁷ Take, for example, Baudrillard's ontology of a code-dominated order of generalized exchange which identifies commodity semiosis and the universalized commutability of value as the glacially reifying agents of his one-dimensional world. On the one hand, he is willing to recognise commodification as a "cultural provocateur", insofar as the extension of the commodity form *per se* has profoundly transformed the very nature of social exchange. Yet, on the other hand, as Andrew Wernick points out, Baudrillard fails to appreciate "... how the normative apparatus of the sign-commodity, publicity and consumer culture is mobilized, at least in part, to manage the tensions provoked by the same extension of the commodity-form which produced the one-dimensional world of consumerism itself".⁷⁸

This paper therefore contends that it is premature to revive the Frankfurt School's spectre of "... a capitalism that has finally mastered its own historicity and so liquidated any endogenous capacity it may once have had for redemptive self-transformation".⁷⁹ Such a theoretical strategy not only fails to realize that ideology is very much in evidence in contemporary structures of communication, but also that individuals do not simply consume images empty of meaning.

In the first instance, as Seumas Miller points out, while it need not possess truth, the defining condition of discourse (or text or statement) is that it possess meaning, and the notion of meaning brings with it the notion of a subject. Thus, "... there is no such thing as meaning *per se* ; there can only ever be meaning for some persons or person. Meaning, in other words, is inherently subjective"⁸⁰ In addition, it follows that the

⁷⁷ Tetzlaff, D. (1991 : 11)

⁷⁸ Wernick, A. (1984 : 22)

⁷⁹ Wernick, A. (1994 : 22)

⁸⁰ Miller, S. (1990 : 119-20)

individual subject is neither an ideological aberration (Althusserians), an “effect” of language (post-Suassurian constructivist theorists of the sign), nor a “function” of the rules of discourse (Foucaultian discourse-power theorists). Far from simply absorbing what flashes past them on a screen, or what obtrudes from a page, it is just as likely, as J.B. Thompson maintains, that individuals are able to maintain some distance, intellectually and emotionally, from the stereotypical images and repetitive patterns in the cultural products that have been constructed of them, for them and around them.⁸¹ “Even children, it seems, have a shrewd sense of fact and fantasy, of what is real, unreal and utterly silly in the television cartoons which occupy so much of their time, and in watching these cartoons they are engaged in a complex process of interpretation”.⁸²

Following Thompson, the appropriation of messages from media texts and other culture artifacts must be acknowledged as an active and potentially critical process of “. . . understanding and interpretation, of discussion, appraisal and incorporation”. Appropriation, Thompson continues, is “. . . (implicitly and unselfconsciously) a process of self-formation and self-understanding, a process of re-forming and re-understanding through the reception and understanding of received messages, by which individuals re-mould the boundaries of their experience and revise their understanding of the world and of themselves”.⁸³

The meanings which result from this process can serve either “. . . to sustain or disrupt, to establish or undermine the structured social contexts within which individuals receive these messages and incorporate them into their everyday lives.”⁸⁴ Thus, from the standpoint of critical social theory, it must be recognized that while these “bottom up” meanings may be constructed within the (admittedly unfavourable) context of the dominant

⁸¹ Thompson, J.B. (1990 : 24)

⁸² Hodge, R. and Tripp, D. (1989), quoted in Thompson, J.B. (1990 : 24)

⁸³ Thompson, J.B. (1990 : 25)

⁸⁴ Thompson, J.B. (1990 : 24)

sign system, the possibility that they can override these systems must be entertained as a viable one.

Thus while this paper takes seriously the centrality of processes of meaning construction and exchange in social life, it parts with the postmodern idea of the “textualization” of reality (Baudrillard) in holding to the idea that “. . . discourse is capable of expressing a truth about the world external to that discourse, that discourse has a determinate relation to the actions of human beings, actions about which it is still possible to make normative judgements”.⁸⁵

It seeks a middle ground, in other words, trying to avoid the free-fall indeterminacy of postmodern theories while being wary of the hard-edged oversimplification of the critical Enlightenment programmes such as that of the Frankfurt School. As Calvin Schragg maintains, in our efforts to “refigure the map of reason” we must endeavour to steer a course between “. . . the Scylla of modernity and the Charybdis of postmodernity, avoiding what Gadamer has deftly called ‘the self-crucifying subjectivity of modernity’, but at the same time navigating around the directionless pluralism of postmodernity”.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Garnham, N. (1990 : 8)

⁸⁶ Schragg, C. (1992 : 86)

1.

**“A Discussion of Jurgen Habermas’s
The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere”**

INTRODUCING THE NOTION OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Introducing his investigation into the nature of public life and the democratic potential of late capitalist societies, John Keane argues that “[if] one takes the meaning of democracy to be a differentiated and pluralistic system of power, wherein decisions of interest to whole collectivities are made autonomously by all their members, then post-war social democracy has affected a decisive and regressive shift in the meaning of the concept, making it equivalent to the transmission of decisions from the governors to the governed”.¹

This sentiment is echoed by Peter Dahlgren, who points to the erosion of a “public sphere” in which individuals can freely assemble to openly and critically interrogate both their own interactions and the wider relations of social and political power within which they are always and already embedded. Dahlgren argues that contemporary constellations of political and economic power all too readily thwart the fragile and complex processes behind the formulation, articulation and implementation of popular political will, and that current developments in the technology, political economy and legal framework of information offer still newer methods of subverting democratic participation.² However, while there is undoubtedly an element of truth to the above pessimistic scenario, this agrees with Dahlgren’s further observation that the unfolding communication and information revolution could also hold out “. . . possibilities for evolving new strategies to enhance

¹ Keane, J. (1984 : 2)

² Dahlgren, P. (1987 : 24)

people's political control over their social, cultural and political lives".³ As a contribution to Left oppositional political thought, this thesis seeks to explore this more optimistic perspective on the evolving relationship between democracy, public life and the media.

Debates about the social role and power of the media in contemporary capitalist societies have largely been polarized between the liberal-pluralist and the Marxist perspectives. While there have been productive developments within the latter approach, particularly with respect to the ideological role performed by the media's systems of signification and representation in the reproductive processes of society, the liberal theory of the free press remains the dominant theoretical paradigm for the elaboration of media policy.

Liberal approaches to the media are based on the pluralist view of society as a complex system of competing groups and interests, none of which is taken to predominate all the time. Within this scheme, the media are identified as adding to the series of countervailing sources of power which, in liberal democracies, are said to prevent a disproportionate degree of power from being concentrated in any one section of the population or organ of government.

Media organizations themselves are seen as bounded organizational systems, enjoying a certain degree of autonomy from the state, political parties and institutionalized pressure groups, and managed by a flexible, professional class according to the credo of "balance, neutrality and objectivity". As far as the capacity of audiences is concerned, liberal theorists consider their engagement with media institutions to be on voluntary and equal terms, and they are generally seen as being capable of manipulating the media in an infinite variety of ways according to their prior needs and dispositions. The media are therefore identified as a "Fourth

³ Dahlgren, P., (1987 : 24)

Estate" - as both a "watchdog" on the arbitrary and repressive use of state power, and as a source of public information vital to a democratic process geared towards the protection and nurturing of individuality.

A free and fair media is therefore seen as a vital component of liberal democracy. For as John Stuart Mill argues in *On Liberty*, in addition to protection against what he called "the tyranny of the magistrate", there also "... needs to be protection against the tyranny of the prevailing opinion and feeling : against the tendency of society to impose, by other means than civil penalties, its own ideas and practices as rules of conduct on those who dissent from them".⁴

This liberal model of a "free and fair media" comes under challenge from a number of thinkers, who argue that the fine rhetoric of "rules of balance and objectivity" is a smokescreen for the coercive and hegemonic nature of state power, or for a public occupied from within by commercial forces. Criticisms of the inadequacy and covertly repressive nature of the liberal model are nowhere more pronounced than within the Marxist tradition.

Marxists basically view capitalist society as being one of class domination, and the media as part of the ideological arena in which various class views are fought out, although within the context of the dominance of certain classes. Contrary to the liberal-pluralist view of media institutions being relatively autonomous from state or commercial forces, Marxist media critics argue that ultimate control is in the hands of monopoly capital. Media professionals therefore enjoy only the illusion of autonomy, for they themselves are fully socialized into, and internalize the norms of the dominant culture. Moreover, while audiences are credited with sometimes negotiating and contesting dominant interpretive frameworks, the Marxist position disputes the liberal contention that they engage the media on a voluntary and equal basis. It argues instead that audiences generally lack

⁴ Mill, J.S. (1969 : 9), quoted in Bennett, T. (1992a : 33)

ready access to alternative meaning systems that could enable them to reject the definitions offered by the media in favour of consistently oppositional definitions.

However, while the liberal model is open to a number of legitimate criticisms, from Marxists and non-Marxist radicals alike, the media strategies of the Left have themselves been inadequate to serve as a viable replacement. As Nicholas Garnham observes, the Left has all too often responded by either formulating some idealist conception of "free" communications without paying sufficient heed to the exigencies of organizational substance or material support; or by falling back on a technical utopianism which sees the expansion of channels of communication as inherently desirable because pluralistic.⁵

Garnham's response is to suggest we turn to Jurgen Habermas's The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere as a more fruitful starting point for work on central issues in the study of mass media and democratic politics. In his opinion, "Habermas's concept of the public sphere offers a sounder basis for the critical analysis of current developments both in the media and democratic politics and for the analysis and political action necessary to rebuild systems of communication and representative democracy adequate to the contemporary world."⁶

In John Durham Peters' view, Habermas's work on the public sphere is an invaluable contribution to critical media theory, offering us "... nothing less than an archaeology of the ideas and ideologies that inform current practices and policies of the mass media".⁷ And in an equally celebratory tone, Craig Calhoun writes that "... in weaving together the

⁵ Garnham, N. (1993 : 367)

It would seem from many accounts that Left political thinkers have themselves fallen prey to the same (culturally approved) vanity and slavery to the science fiction-like advance in consumer technology. In many instances the ideological dangers of "technology for its own sake" appear to be curiously overlooked.

⁶ Garnham, N., (1993 : 364)

⁷ Peters, J.D. (1993 : 542)

economic, social-organizational, communicational, social-psychological, and cultural dimensions of its problem in a historically specific analysis, Habermas offers an interdisciplinary account which is the richest, best developed conceptualization available of the social nature and foundations of public life".⁸

Habermas was attracted to the notion of the public sphere because of its potential as a foundation for a critique of a society based on democratic principles, and in The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, he sets out to uncover the conditions for the exercise of practical reason in public affairs. As Cohen argues, Habermas sought to move away from the resigned political conclusions of Adorno and Horkheimer, and to open a fresh analysis of the modern objective spirit (the state, civil society and their mediations) by thematizing the practical dimensions of political institutions and uncovering existing emancipatory norms by which to orient praxis.⁹ The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere can thus be read as an attempt to articulate the historical and structural conditions under which a normative concept of democracy was generated and institutionalized. It attempts, thereby, to identify those political and social forms which once secured individual autonomy and public freedom, and advocates the radicalization of these forms to contemporary conditions.

If one follows Cohen's argument, Habermas's political theory can in general be read as a response to the emergence of technocratic ideologies that reduce normative, practical choices to the decisionist judgements of engineers, and which subordinate political questions to the logic of administrative science in the service of the vastly expanded state apparatus.¹⁰ His work on the public sphere thus flows from his conviction that it is only within institutionally secured public spaces that allow for the articulation of all needs, interests and values that citizens can achieve

⁸ Calhoun, C. (1993 : 41)

⁹ Cohen, J. (1979 : 73)

¹⁰ Cohen, J. (1979 : 70)

clarification of what is practically necessary and objectively possible - clarification, that is, of how to interpret norms, values and, interests and needs in relation to technological possibilities.¹¹ In so emphasizing both institutional and discursive contingencies, the public sphere emerges as a conceptually powerful analytical device, able to link a variety of actors, factors and contexts together in a cohesive theoretical framework.

However, behind this analytical elaboration of the public sphere (as an institutional location mediating between the state and civil society) is a concern to "... 'renormatize' and democratize the state by opening up the ends of political and economic practice to rational and ethical reflection, ie. participation of a reactivated public able to freely form its potential will."¹² Thus, while the concept of the public sphere was meant as an analytical tool for ordering certain phenomena and placing them in a particular context as part of a categorical frame, the concept has inevitable normative connotations. As Habermas puts it, the political public sphere is the "... fundamental concept of a theory of democracy whose intent is normative", ¹³ for its relation to certain positions in normative political theory serves to "... link the historical analysis with our value-laden and future-oriented enterprise of making some sort of diagnosis of our present situation, particularly for those who are still committed to the project of radical democracy."¹⁴

According to Cohen, the red thread running through Habermas's political writings is "... the attempt to redeem the promise of the classical concept of politics to provide practical orientation to the 'just and good life', without relinquishing the rigor of scientific analysis".¹⁵ Habermas's notion of the public sphere thus seeks to historically ground the Kantian vision of enlightened public opinion as the locus of popular sovereignty. It seeks thereby to promote the idea of a rational and interactive process of

¹¹ Cohen, J. (1979 : 71)

¹² Cohen, J. (1979 : 71)

¹³ Habermas, J. (1993 : 446)

¹⁴ Habermas, J. (1993 : 462-63)

¹⁵ Cohen, J. (1979 : 70)

discussion between autonomous persons in a context free from domination not only as the sole guarantee of a democratic and ethically structured political order, but also as the sole legitimate source of law. As one commentator puts it, in the context of advanced capitalism, with an interventionist state attempting to manage social development and cope with political and economic crisis, and with democratic ideals of the defensive, the vision behind a thriving democratic public sphere - that of profound popular and official legitimacy and moral authority - has quite radical implications.¹⁶ Indeed, in a social and cultural world in which our inherited structures of public communication - those institutions within which we construct, distribute and consume symbolic forms - are undergoing a profound change, we are increasingly forced to rethink the nature of citizenship and the relation between politics and the overall context of social communication.

Seen against the background of plebiscitary manipulation, privatized apathy, and a low level of citizen participation in the definition of public policy and its parameters, the vision behind Habermas's work take on a renewed, and perhaps greater relevance than they had some 30 years ago. Consequently, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere should be used as an indispensable resources by critical social theorists concerned to theorize the limits of discursive interactions in conditions defined by the late-twentieth century welfare mass democracy. While Habermas's liberal model of the bourgeois public sphere is not wholly satisfactory to these conditions¹⁷, the category of the public sphere nevertheless remains of political and

¹⁶ Dahlgren, P. (1987 : 26) According to Nicholas Garnham (1993 : 375), Habermas's work on the public sphere "... sets out to save a small portion of our existence from the rule of fate", and its rationalist and universalist vision "... must thus be distinguished from that other strand in the dialectic of the Enlightenment, that of scientific rationality and the hubris of the human power that accompanied it." In Garnham's opinion, we should see the model of the public sphere and of the democratic polity of which it is a part in the image of the classical garden - "... a small tamed patch within a sea of untamed nature (fate) ever ready to take over if the attention of the gardeners slackens for an instant."

¹⁷ See Peter Uwe Hohendahl (1993) and Nancy Frazer (1993) for their discussions of different models of the public sphere.

theoretical value to those concerned with exploring the possibilities for the enlargement of human emancipation in the age of electronic media.

II.

ON THE GENESIS AND CONSTITUTION OF THE BOURGEOIS PUBLIC SPHERE

In their struggle against the powers of the absolutist state, the ascending bourgeois classes in Western Europe (especially during the 18th century) managed to generate a new social space or field between the state and civil society. Seeking to break away from the power arrangement between princes and estates, the Third Estate introduced the principle of supervision, and demanded that proceedings be made public. In contrast to the "representative publicness" of the medieval period (where the ruling nobility, its power and its symbols of sovereignty were merely displayed before the populace), this new public sphere, situated *sui generis* between the absolutist state and the world of social labour and commodity trade, offered the possibility for citizens, using their own critical reason, to come together, as a "public"; to engage in open discussion on the State's exercise of power; and to critically negate its political norms and its monopoly of interpretation. In so subjecting the general rules of social intercourse in their fundamentally privatized yet publicly relevant sphere of labour and commodity exchange to public debate, the ascending bourgeoisie sought nothing less than a transformation of the nature of power.¹⁸

¹⁸

Wood (1995 : 204) makes the point that the modern concept of democracy differs markedly from the ancient concept, which grew out of an historical experience which had conferred a unique status on subordinate classes. The modern concept of democracy, on the other hand, began with lords asserting their independent powers against the claims of monarchy, and consists of modern constitutional principles, ideas of limited government, the separation of powers, and so on. Thus, whereas the ancient concept claimed to be *masterless*, and was based on citizenship and a balance of power between rich and poor, the founding principle of the modern variety is *lordship* - that is, the privilege of propertied gentlemen, and their freedom to dispose of their property and servants at will. In a

Of this transformation of power, Michel Foucault writes : "A fear haunted the latter half of the eighteenth century : the fear of darkened spaces, of the pall of gloom which prevents the full visibility of things, men, and truth. It sought to break up the patches of darkness that blocked the lights, eliminate the shadowy area of society, demolish the unlit chambers where arbitrary political acts, monarchical caprice, religious superstitions, tyrannical and priestly plots, epidemics and the illusions of ignorance were fomented . . . This reign of 'opinion', so often invoked at the time, represents a mode of operation through which power will be exercised by virtue of the mere fact of things being known and people seen in a sort of immediate, collective and anonymous gaze."¹⁹

At the heart of this momentous shift in the basic structure of political authority (from kingly authority to public surveillance) was the *public sphere* of civil society, in which open critique, instead of stultifying pomp, became the normative mode of public communication. As Habermas writes, this public sphere developed ". . . to the extent to which the public concern regarding the private sphere of civil society was no longer confined to the authorities but was considered by the subjects as one that was properly theirs".²⁰ The public sphere, according to Eley, ". . . eventuated from the struggle against absolutism . . . and aimed at transforming arbitrary authority into rational authority subject to the scrutiny of a citizenry organized into a public body under the law."²¹ In terms of overt political change, the public sphere's new discursive relations were identified most obviously with ". . . the demand for representative government and a liberal constitution and more broadly with the basic civil freedoms before the law (speech, press, assembly, association, no arrest without trial, and so on)."²²

very real sense, then, the "people" involved in the so-called "public debate" of the bourgeois public sphere occupied a privileged stratum constituting an exclusive political nation situated in a public realm between the monarch and the multitude. Foucault, M. (1980 : 153-4)

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Habermas, J. (1994 : 89)

Eley, G. (1993 : 290)

Eley, G. (1993 : 290)

Two interlinked developments were crucial to the emergence of such a sphere : firstly, the development of the capitalist market economy and secondly, the consolidation of the state as a depersonalized authority and the extension of its bureaucratic apparatus. As Eley observes, Habermas understands these social transformations as " . . . a trade-driven transition from feudalism to capitalism in which the capital accumulation resulting from long-distance commerce plays the key role and for which the mercantilist policies of the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were the midwife."

²³ Habermas, in other words, postulates a causal homology of culture and economics, in the sense that the category of the public was ". . . the unintended consequence of long-run socioeconomic change eventually precipitated by the aspirations of a successful and self-conscious bourgeoisie whose economic functions and social standing implied a cumulative agenda of desirable innovation".²⁴ The market economy was therefore a precondition for the public sphere, insofar as it enabled private persons to be left to themselves, thereby completing the privatization of civil society.²⁵ This came to be reflected in the codification of civil law, through which basic private freedoms were guaranteed, establishing a fundamental parity among persons.²⁶ Civil society came to be understood as neutral

²³ Eley, G. (1993 : 291)

²⁴ Eley, G. (1993 : 291)

²⁵ According to Wood (1995 : 209-211), the peasant could only join the body of citizens as a "free and equal" wage-labourer once dispossessed and deracinated, detached from both his property and his community, together with its common and customary rights. The price paid by the "labouring multitude" for entry into the political community was therefore their identity as isolated ("sovereign") individuals, and the dissipation of their prescriptive attitudes and "extra-economic" differences in the solvent of the market, where individuals became interchangeable units of labour, abstracted from any specific personal or social identity. This effective devaluation of citizenship entailed by capitalist social relations is, in Wood's view, an essential attribute of modern democracy, which more and more came to be identified with liberalism. More and more, she contends, the focus of "democracy" has shifted ". . . away from the active exercise of popular power to the passive enjoyment of constitutional and procedural safeguards and rights, and away from the collective power of subordinate classes to the privacy and isolation of the individual citizen." (1995 : 227)

²⁶ This assertion must not allow us to lose sight of the fact that the modern relation between the individual citizen and the civic community is an "imagined community" (Anderson, 1983), a fiction, a mythical abstraction, in conflict with the experience of the citizens' daily life.

concerning power and domination²⁷; to be fully developed through the discovery of "right" policies.

It ought to be noted that this was the origin of the ideology of the *bourgeois* public sphere, in which - on the basis of property being the basic criterion for active participation in the public sphere - the independent functioning of free competition, together with its balance of supply and demand, is always assumed to be the natural order.

Freed from the imperatives of the state and economy, the public sphere emerged as an institutional location wherein, on the basis of a new sociability, individuals could coordinate human life through the production and circulation of discourses which could in principle be critical of the state. The basic principle was that of *publicity*, with democracy being realized only when personal opinions could evolve through rational-critical debate into *public opinion*. Social integration was to be based on communication, rather than on domination; and social development on the institutionalization of public opinion arrived at through rational debate, rather than on secret decisionist politics.

Calhoun has identified two processes leading to the institutionalization of the public sphere. The first was the reconstitution of the family as an intimate sphere (to be distinguished from the economy within the private sphere), for this provided a crucial basis for the immanent critique of the bourgeois public sphere itself, teaching as it did that there was something essential to humanity that economy or other status could not take away.²⁸ As Cohen puts it, the bourgeois public sphere presupposed the specifically modern forms of subjectivity and autonomy generated within the bourgeois nuclear family, through the psychological emancipation within the intimate

²⁷ Which, of course, it was not. As Wood (1995 : 213) maintains, while in capitalist democracy socio-economic position does not determine the right to citizenship, civil equality does not directly affect or even significantly modify class inequality - which will always limit democracy in capitalism.

²⁸ Calhoun, C. (1993 : 3)

sphere (family as freely chosen community) and the economic emancipation by the market.²⁹

The second process identified by Calhoun was the development and transmutation of the literary public sphere, which was to form the foundation of political public sphere in several ways.³⁰ For one, the literature of the period changed the relations between author, work and public into an intimate, mutual relationship involving concern for self-knowledge and empathy. Second, the world of letters promoted the idea of culture as an autonomous reality, such that culture became a "... ready topic of discussion through which an audience-oriented subjectivity communicated with itself".³¹ As Hohendahl explains, this separation of the contents of culture from the market, and the exposure of cultural objects to critical discussion was a crucial preparation for human self-determination and political emancipation.³² Finally, through a process largely precipitated by the rise of the periodical press - which permitted a plurality of ideas to be aired in a context free from both state and capital - the literary public sphere was instrumental in developing the *socio-institutional bases* of the political public sphere, ranging from meeting places to journals to webs of social relations. By the first decade of the 18th century there were some 3000 coffee-houses in London alone, each with a core of "regulars", mostly businessmen discussing trade, but also the attendant "news", with conversation branching out into affairs of state administration and politics.³³ These circles were linked together through the circulation of journals of opinion and the periodical press, which simply transposed the same conversation onto another medium.³⁴ The press, Habermas maintains, having "evolved out of

²⁹ Cohen, J. (1979 : 77)

³⁰ It was largely because the public sphere was rooted in the world of letters that it took the form of an older elite public as constitutive of the whole citizenry, with education and property ownership being the two criteria for admission.

³¹ Calhoun, C. (1993 : 29)

³² Hohendahl, P.U. (1979 : 90)

³³ A similar circumstance developed in French salons (public institutions located in private homes), and German table societies (small academic institutions, with the "public" largely excluded).

³⁴ According to Geoff Eley (1993 : 291), the reshaping of the overall context of social communication was linked to "... the growth of urban culture as the novel

the public's use of its reason" and having been merely "an extension of its debate", remained thoroughly an institution of this very public : "... effective in the mode of a transmitter and amplifier, no longer a mere vehicle for the transportation of information, but not yet a medium for culture as an object of consumption".³⁵ In so promoting a political awareness amongst its readers, the emergent commercial press helped to lay the foundations for the middle-class assault on the aristocratic order.

This middle class, as James Curran points out, were largely excluded from the institutionalized political process by the limited franchise. This gave the great landed families effective control over small and unrepresentative constituencies. In addition, the middle class was not only more-or-less excluded from the central bureaucracy and the spoils of office by the patronage system of the dominant landed class who controlled the state, but its members were also effectively denied the opportunity to participate meaningfully in national politics by the consensual political values of the landed elite that discouraged political participation. Typical of this was "... the concept of 'virtual representation' by which politicians drawn from the landed elite were said to represent the public by virtue of their independence and tradition of public service, even though they were not directly elected by the people".³⁶ Such aristocratic political ascendancy was maintained in no small part by the regulation of the press.

"Newspapers were subjected to strict legal controls - the law of seditious libel, which was used to prevent criticism of the political system, general warrants issued at the discretion of the authorities against persons suspected of committing a seditious libel, and a legal ban on the reporting of

arena of a locally organized public life (meeting houses, concert halls, theatres, opera houses, lecture halls, museums), to a new infrastructure of social communication (the press, publishing companies, and other literary media ; the rise of a reading public via reading and language societies ; subscription publishing and lending libraries ; improved transportation ; and adapted centres of sociability like coffeehouses, taverns, and clubs), and to a new universe of voluntary association"

³⁵ Habermas, J. (1989 : 183)

³⁶ Curran, J. (1992b : 221)

parliament. In addition, taxes on newspapers, advertisements and paper were introduced in 1712 mainly in order to increase the price of newspapers and thereby restrict their circulation. Successive administrations also sought to manage the political press by offering secret service subsidies, official advertising and exclusive information in return for editorial services rendered to the government as well as giving rewards and sinecures to sympathetic journalists.”³⁷

In other words, the political press was largely dominated by the landed elite who controlled both government and parliament. However, subsequent economic growth frustrated these early regulative measure by giving rise to, among other things, a growing middle-class public for newspapers, a rising volume of advertising to aid their development, and improved postal communications. These developments saw a dramatic increase in more politicized, regional coverage of public affairs,³⁸ which in turn fostered the development of a middle-class political culture, centred on clubs, political societies and coffee-houses.

This development of bourgeois political culture is particularly pertinent, for a crucial characteristic of these new centres and forms of sociability of early modern Europe was that social intercourse - in principle at least - disregarded status altogether, and was guided by the notion of a common interest in “truth” or right policy. While not fully realized in practice, the idea has an importance of its own : that the identity of the speaker was to carry the day, and that rational argument was to be the sole arbiter of any issue. Ideally, everyone was to have access to the public realm and no one was to enter into public discourse with an advantage over others.

³⁷ Curran, J., (1992b : 221)

³⁸ The commercial press expanded steadily during the late Georgian and early Victorian period. Between 1781 and 1851 the number of newspapers increased from 76 to 563 ; their aggregate annual sales from 14 million in 1780 to 85 million in 1851. [See Asquith, “The Structure, Ownership and Control of the Press 1780 - 1855”, in Boyce, G., Curran, J., & Wingate, P., (eds), Newspaper History, (London : Constable, 1978), cited Curran, J. (1992b : 223)]

The public sphere, as envisioned by Habermas, stands in contrast to institutions that are controlled from without or determined by power relations. As such, it promises democratic control and participation.³⁹ In this respect, literary circles proved to be crucial for the formation of the public sphere : not only because they provided the initial meeting places for informed private citizens, but also because the practice of literary criticism itself - involving the lay judgements of private persons - institutionalized a form of rational-critical discourse about objects of common concern that could be carried over directly into political discussion.

Indeed, as Habermas was to write later, the significance of such associational life for future developments lay more in its organizational forms than with its manifest functions. Societies for enlightenment, cultural associations, free-masonry lodges, and orders of *illuminati* were "... associations constituted by the free, that is, private, decisions of their founding members, based on voluntary membership, and characterized internally by egalitarian practices of sociability, free discussions, decision by majority, etc. While these societies certainly remained an exclusive bourgeois affair, they did provide the training ground for what were to become a future society's norms of equality".⁴⁰

The bourgeois public sphere, then, was more than the mere institutionalization of a set of interests and an opposition between state and society. Crucially, it was about the development of a practice of rational-critical discourse on political matters.⁴¹ Insofar as it was based on "the people's public use of their reason", such a mode of social interaction and

³⁹ In Habermas's conception, the public sphere developed as an institutional forum in which public discussions of alternative principles and courses of social action generated arguments which became binding on participants, not from dogmatic acceptance, but because the cogency of the arguments themselves yielded a rational consensus. This suspension of personal interests in favour of a common rationality brings to mind both Rousseau's notion of a "general will" and Kant's "categorical imperative".

⁴⁰ Habermas, J. (1993 : 423-4)

⁴¹ Calhoun, C. (1993 : 27)

political confrontation was historically novel, and potentially transformative of the existing structure of power and authority.

III.

ON THE TRANSFORMATION AND DECLINE OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, *laissez-faire* capitalism reached a point of maturity, and rapid social developments began to alter the conditions and premises of the public sphere. Industrialization, urbanization, the growth of literacy and the popular press, as well as the rise of the administrative and interventionist state all contributed in various ways to its decline. Taken together, these structural changes brought to a head the tension between the original class limitations of the public sphere and its principled openness. For at the heart of the bourgeois public sphere lay a fundamental (and arguably paralyzing) contradiction : although the norms of autonomy, universality of access, and a plurality of institutions for political participation, autonomy and democracy were institutionalized *in principle*, the admission criteria - education and ownership of property - were clearly not extended to the population as a whole. And to the extent that the bourgeois political public sphere became more democratic - in a real sense, in terms of greater participation - so its guiding principle, the quality of rational-critical discourse by informed individuals, began to lose in strength.

However, while Calhoun is certainly correct in his observation that the democratic broadening of the constituency of the public was at the cost of its internally democratic functioning,⁴² it would be simplistic to argue that the mere "intrusion of the ignorant masses into the public realm" was sufficient to lead to the disintegration of its principle of critical public discourse. For

⁴² Calhoun, C. (1993 : 27)

the developments leading up to the loss of the critical function of the public sphere, and the severance of public opinion from practical power were decidedly more complex.

As the public sphere extended itself (i.e. beyond the bounds of the bourgeoisie) to become more inclusive of society - such that the possibilities of its institutionalized principles were extended to those previously excluded - so a greater number and diversity of interests logically entered the public debate. Consequently, social and economic inequalities could no longer be "bracketed", and in fact increasingly became the basis of discussion and action. Such competing interests, however, failed to find satisfactory resolution in the private realm, forcing individuals to form collective special-interest organizations and groups to promote themselves through the public sphere. This collectivizing tendency was one development which contributed to the destruction of the basis of the liberal public sphere, in that it undermined the idea of individuals coming together as free and equal citizens in their private capacities to form a public and to engage in critical rational debate.

Another development which was to undermine the liberal (classical) public sphere flows from the changing nature of public "debate", from which the idea of a "common interest" became patently absent. For as the bourgeois public sphere was forced to become less socially exclusive, it increasingly became ". . . a court of appeal for the disinherited, a realm racked by revolt, agitation, and violent repression".⁴³ And as soon as the social conflicts of a developed class society are reflected in the public realm, public discourse loses its character of a discussion free from domination.⁴⁴

Yet it was around 1870, with liberal competitive capitalism giving way to an organized capitalism of cartels and trusts, that Habermas locates the

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Keane, J. (1984 : 92)

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Hohendahl, P. (1979 : 93)

destruction of the basis of the liberal public sphere. For it was at this point that a decisive structural change occurred in the public sphere. This involved a shift away from a public sphere composed of private people gathered together as a public (that is, distinct from the state) towards a public sphere in which, on the one hand, private organizations began increasingly to assume public powers, while on the other, the state - both under pressure from corporate actors and prompted by various welfare demands for the services of the state - increasingly penetrated the private realm.

Under monopoly capitalism, not only did an increasingly uneven distribution of wealth lead to rising entry costs to the public sphere (and thus to unequal access to and control over that sphere), but the State itself became an active, and in fact a major participant in the economy, thereby coming to share the private interests pursued there. As Garnham points out, at the same time as the State was called upon by class forces to defend and expand the public sphere against the encroaching power of private capital (for example, through the provision of public education, public libraries, systems of public cultural subsidies etc.), it was also engaged as a coordinator and infrastructure provider for monopoly capitalism.⁴⁵ The result of these pressures was that the State became, in effect, an independent administrative and bureaucratic interest, distinct from the rationalist determinations of social ends and of the means to those ends in that political realm guaranteed by the existence of the public sphere. In short, as Garnham puts it, the space between civil society and the State (what had become the public sphere under liberal capitalism) was "squeezed shut" between these two increasingly collaborative behemoths.⁴⁶

The result of this collaboration was the replacement of the notion of an objective, general interest with one of a fairly negotiated compromise of interests between private bureaucracies, special-interest associations,

⁴⁵ Garnham, N. (1990 : 16)

⁴⁶ Garnham, N. (1990 : 16)

parties and public administration. It is at this point that one can speak of the "disintegration" of the public sphere. For, insofar as the public sphere depended on a clear separation between the private realm and public power, their mutual interpenetration inevitably destroyed it, and with it the idea of rationalizing power through the medium of public discussion among private individuals. The public sphere thus became no more than a sounding board used to acclaim decisions which were no longer prepared by public discourse.

IV.

ON THE "REFEUDALIZATION" OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE

This blurring of the distinctions between public and private in political and economic affairs, and the rationalization and shrinking of the private intimate sphere (family life) through the consolidation of the modern industrial welfare state was further compounded by developments in the mass media. As Dahlgren observes, the concentration of ownership in the media industry, and the increasing dominance of advertising and public relations within the field of public communications led to a "... gradual shift from an (albeit limited) public of political and cultural debaters to a mass public of consumers".⁴⁷

Thus, whereas the press had once underpinned the public sphere by providing an arena for political debate - by providing information (mainly commercial and financial intelligence) and political controversy - its functions were transformed over time. As Elliott observes, from the early press's original base in elite formation, "... the commercial function has expanded beyond all recognition and with the transformation of news into

⁴⁷ Dahlgren, P. & Sparks, C. (1993 :4)

commodity, the political function has been eclipsed".⁴⁸ The monopolized mass media, so the argument goes, contribute to the demise of authentic democratic discussion by keeping the population uninformed and uncritical, patronizing citizens by confining their demands to an exclusively private realm.

With effective participation in the process of public communication being possible only through organized interest groups, the public body of private individuals who had previously related individually to each other became defunct, to be replaced by other institutions that reproduced that image of a public sphere in a distorted guise. As the twentieth century progressed, then, so the free exchange of ideas among equals became transformed into less democratic communicative forms.

For example, Habermas identifies mass political parties as undermining the original nature of the bourgeois public sphere. "Direct mutual contact between the members of the public are lost to the degree that the parties, having become integral parts of the system of special-interest associations under public law, had to transmit and represent at any given time the interests of several such organizations that grew out of the private sphere into the public sphere".⁴⁹ In this context, political parties can neither be seen as assemblies of critical citizens concerned to promote the process of rational discourse, nor even as groups of voters. Rather, as Calhoun interprets them, political parties are bureaucratic organizations aimed at motivating voters and attracting their psychological identification and acclamation by voting. They are, in other words, instruments aimed at the ideological integration and political mobilization of the broad voting masses.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Elliott, P. (1986 : 108)

⁴⁹ Habermas, J. (1989 : 204), quoted in Calhoun, C. (1993 : 27)

⁵⁰ Calhoun, C. (1993 : 26-7)

The public sphere, therefore, becomes an arena in which large organizations strive for political compromise with the state and with each other, and excludes the public wherever possible. It becomes, in other words, a setting for states and corporate actors to develop legitimacy - not by responding appropriately to an independent and critical public, but by seeking to instil in social actors motivations that conform to the needs of the overall system dominated by those states and corporate actors. The media become accessories to this by mobilizing purchasing power, loyalty, or conformist behaviour, and thereby influencing the decisions of consumers, voters, and clients.

As Dahlgren observes : "Journalism's critical role in the wake of advertising, entertainment and public relations becomes muted. Public opinion is no longer a process of rational discourse but the result of publicity and social engineering in the media".⁵¹ Whereas before critical authority was connected to the normative mandate that the exercise of political and social power be subjected to public debate, public opinion becomes instead " . . . the object to be molded in connection with a staged display of, and manipulative propagation of, publicity in the service of persons and institutions, consumer goods and programs".⁵² To the extent that the semantic meaning of the concept of "publicity" changes from openness of discussion and commerce as well as popular access to government (the equivalent of the Soviet term *glasnost*), to nothing more than public relations and marketing - such that the process of "making public" comes to simply serve the "arcane policies of special interests" - so the critical functions of the political public sphere are quite literally incapacitated.

Such developments are for Habermas reminiscent of the "representative publicity" (*repräsentative Öffentlichkeit*) of the High Middle Ages. This sense of the public makes no reference to an open social site

⁵¹ Dahlgren, P and Sparks, C. (1993 : 4)

⁵² Habermas, J. (1989 : 236)

where citizens participate through discussion : "...it rather suggests the display of prestige, not critical discussion, spectacle, not debate, and appearance *before* the people, as on a stage, not *for* them".⁵³ This is the point of the public sphere's "refeudalization" - when representation and appearances outweigh rational debate, when the mass of people come to be excluded from public discussion and democratic decision-making as ideas are "sold" to them, and when decisions and political programmes are legitimated through sophisticated media techniques.⁵⁴

Habermas's account of the structural change of the public sphere from critical participation to consumerist manipulation is typical of the Frankfurt School's critique of mass culture, in which "... rational-critical debate had a tendency to be replaced by consumption, and the web of public communication unravelled into acts of individuated reception, however uniform in mode".⁵⁵ Thus, whereas previously literary works were read by individuals and became the basis for group discussion and the critical discourse of literary publication, modern media and the modern style of appropriation "... removed the ground for a communication about what has been appropriated".⁵⁶

For Habermas, then, the electronic means of mass communications are a stupifying and narcotizing force which serves only to extend the refeudalization of the public sphere. Such media, he argues, "... draw the eyes and ears of the public under their spell but at the same time, by taking away its distance, place it under 'tutelage', which is to say they deprive it of the opportunity to say something and disagree".⁵⁷ Consequently, "... the world fashioned by the mass media is a public sphere in appearance only ... a sham semblance of its former self, with the key tendency being to replace

⁵³ Habermas, J. (1989 : 8)
⁵⁴ Thompson, J.B. (1993 : 178)
⁵⁵ Calhoun, C. (1993 : 161)
⁵⁶ Habermas, J. (1989 : 163)
⁵⁷ Habermas, J. (1989 : 171)

the shared critical activity of public discourse by a more passive culture consumption on the one hand, and an apolitical sociability on the other".⁵⁸

Taking on the traits of a "secondary realm of intimacy", the mass media, especially in the form of television, have an immediacy which makes it almost impossible to "bracket" personal attributes and concentrate on rational-critical arguments.⁵⁹ "Representative publicity" is revived as personalized politics in which candidates are made into media stars. This phenomenon generates a "sentimentality towards persons and a corresponding cynicism towards institutions", which curtails ". . . the subjective capacity for rational criticism of public authority, even where it might objectively be possible".⁶⁰

"Media power", Habermas later wrote, emerged as ". . . a new set of influence which, used for purposes of manipulation, once and for all took care of the innocence of the principle of publicity. The public sphere, simultaneously prestructured and dominated by the mass media, developed into an arena infiltrated by power in which, by means of topic selection and topical contributions, a battle is fought not only over influence but over the control of communication flows that affect behaviour while their strategic intentions are kept hidden as much as possible".⁶¹

⁵⁸ Habermas, J. (1989 : 160)

⁵⁹ Habermas, J. (1989 : 172)

⁶⁰ Habermas, J. (1989 : 172)

⁶¹ Habermas, J. (1989 : 437)

2.

**“Criticizing the conceptual framework of
The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere
and Habermas’s model of communication”**

Though Habermas’s representation of the modern public sphere is certainly compelling, it can be justifiably criticised in a number of ways. The most apparent relates to his empirical accounts of the different historical epochs that inform the argument. As James Curran observes, Habermas’s argument is methodologically flawed, based as it is on contrasting “. . . a golden era that never existed with an equally misleading representation of present times as a dystopia” - a contrast which does not survive empirical historical scrutiny.¹ In addition to this conundrum, Habermas’s text also suffers from the methodological problem that the basis of his analysis of the symptoms of modern society appears far more restricted than that of his earlier discussions of the rise and constitution of the public sphere.

Habermas’s work also suffers from a number of theoretical problems, and it is the task of this chapter to critically explore both these deficiencies and the empirical flaws of his argument, with a view of reworking the conceptual framework of his theory of the public sphere so as to enable a better understanding of the possibilities of democratic interventions in contemporary conditions. The core argument of this chapter lies in the assertion that while Habermas’s vision of the public sphere remains of political relevance, the construct can only maintain its theoretical validity in changing social and technological circumstances if its contemporary proponents are willing to relinquish some of the conceptual underpinnings to which Habermas adheres. Only then will a clearer understanding of the nature and dynamics of contemporary public communications be possible,

¹ Curran, J. & Sparks, C. (1991 : 46)

laying the foundation for a critical exploration of the possibilities for more open and democratic appropriation of (otherwise unintelligible) signifying systems.

A clear demonstration of the empirical weakness of The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere is Habermas's incorrect assessment of the history and importance of the English Parliament, and his belief that the years between 1832 and 1867 were the high point of parliamentarianism. According to Wolfgang Jager, the alleged power of public opinion in fact never existed, and far from being based on rational consensus, parliamentary politics has always been conducted on the basis of compromise adapted to interests.² Contrary to Habermas's claim that the liberal public sphere and its most important institutions remained strictly separate from the private domain of production, historical evidence suggests that massive interest lobbies already existed in parliament in the phases of competitive capitalism. Thus, since public opinion already served economic interests, since the alleged manipulation in contemporary parliamentarianism blossomed already in the mid-nineteenth century and since, as Jager argues, there has never in fact existed a public sphere corresponding to Habermas's model, it is impossible to speak of a disintegration of the public sphere.

An interesting question arising from Habermas's empirically inadequate account of bourgeois public life is the extent to which he "reads" his own normative defense of the Enlightenment heritage back into the history of modern European societies. That is to say, it could well be argued that Habermas presents an account of the liberal public sphere as he would like it to have been, so as to both justify and substantiate his theory of its subsequent disintegration, and to emerge with a normative benchmark for his later work on communicative action.³

² Jager, W., cited in Hohendahl, P.U., (1979 : 94-95)

³ The ideological nature of the human sciences in general is of course a subject that cannot be covered briefly. Suffice it to say, Habermas himself was not

This criticism could, for instance, be levelled with equal force at both Habermas's mythic idealization of the "independent" eighteenth century press, and at his cursory dismissal of its radical counterpart. With respect to the development of the British press, liberal revisionist historians have demonstrated that far from being the embodiment of reasoned discourse of private individuals, the supposedly "independent" press was caught up in "... an elaborate web of faction fighting, financial corruption and ideological management".⁴ Contrary to Habermas's claim that the press was free from the manipulative agency of collectivized politics, then, the British press was polemicist and faction-ridden, and operated in the context of secret service subsidies, opposition grants and the widespread bribing of journalists.⁵

As regards the radical elements of the press, Habermas somewhat dismissively considered their rise - in the early nineteenth century - as simply part of the process whereby the public sphere was expanded, and their fall as marking the resumption of a more reasoned public discourse in which "... the press as a forum of rational-critical debate [was] released from the pressure to take sides ideologically".⁶ However, not only were these radical newspapers far from incidental (they in fact became the circulation leaders in the first half of the nineteenth century), but the radical press were no more an ideological pollutant than were the bourgeois "engines of propaganda" celebrated by Habermas.⁷ Indeed, as Curran argues, far from deviating from reasoned debate, the radical press - in

blind to the way in which ideological factors influence the definition and practice of the social and human sciences. This much is apparent from his later distinction between "empirical-analytic sciences", "historical-hermeneutic sciences" and, finally, the notion of a "critical social science" which, as De Kadt (1975 : 7) observes, "... involves an attempt to develop a formula that will emancipate social thought from the constraining integument of a particular ideological perspective."

⁴ Curran, J. and Sparks, C. (1991 :41)
For liberal revisionist press history, see Boyce, G. *et al* (ed), Newspaper History : From the 17th Century to the Present Day, (London : Constable, 1978) ; Koss, S., The Rise and Fall of the Political Press in Britain, Vol. 1 & 2, (London : Hamish Hamilton, 1981) ; and Jeremy Black, The English Press in the Eighteenth Century, (London ; Croom Helm, 1987)

⁵ Curran, J. (1992a : 94-95)

⁶ Habermas, J. (1989 : 184)

⁷ Curran, J. & Sparks, C. (1991 : 40)

challenging the bourgeois version of reason, developing their own elaborate analysis of society which challenged the legitimacy of the capitalist order, and in proclaiming a public opinion different from that asserted by the bourgeois press - were merely repudiating the premises of this debate.⁸

What lies behind such omissions, oversights and at best "token" recognition of the significance of certain forms of public discourse and activity in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries is Habermas' image of the public sphere as a highly organized, functional and efficient institution - an image which concealed its true nature. As Negt and Kluge maintain, the public sphere has never really existed as a unified principle, and what Habermas describes as an "institution" turns out rather to be "... the cumulation of individual public spheres merely abstractly related to one another".⁹

Habermas has subsequently conceded to this line of criticism, recognizing not only that the exclusion of the culturally and politically mobilized lower strata entailed the "... pluralization of the public sphere in the very process of its emergence", but also that the same structures of communication simultaneously gave rise to the formation of several arenas where, besides the hegemonic bourgeois public sphere, additional subcultural or class-specific public spheres were constituted on the basis of their own and initially not easily reconcilable premises.¹⁰ He writes, for instance, that it was only after reading Mikhail Bakhtin's Rabelais and his World that his eyes became really open to the *inner* dynamics of a plebian culture : "This culture of the common people apparently was by no means only a backdrop, that is, a passive echo of the dominant culture ; it was also the periodically recurring violent revolt of a counterproject to the

⁸ Curran, J. & Sparks, C. (1991 : 40)

⁹ Negt and Kluge, quoted in Hohendahl, P.U. (1979 : 105)

¹⁰ Habermas, J. (1993 : 426)

hierarchical world of domination, with its official celebrations and everyday disciplines.”¹¹

Such concessions, however, are unfortunately a case of too little, too late. Habermas's position in The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere adheres too tightly to an over-rational conception of public communication, and displays an (arguably ideological) interest in presenting the bourgeois public sphere as an organized and integrated institutional entity (so as to be able to present the concept as a normative ideal). This caused him to overlook or downplay the significance of alternative public spheres and, indeed, most forms of public discourse and activity which were not part of, and in many cases excluded from or opposed to the forms of bourgeois sensibility.

This is a serious occlusion, for under both the liberal and advanced stages of capitalism “. . . there have existed other fora which have shaped people's political consciousness, served as networks of information, rumour and gossip, and provided settings for cultural expression”.¹² Habermas, however, completely disregards “penny dreadfuls”, lurid crime and scandal sheets, and other less than altogether rational-critical branches of the press. Furthermore, he neglects to analyse the demagoguery of travelling orators, and “. . . glances only in passing at the relationship of crowds to political discourse”.¹³

A similar oversight within Habermas's account of public life concerns the carnivals and public festivals that flourished in Europe during the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. This omission is regrettable, for as the work of Mikhail Bakhtin demonstrates, such events were about more than feasting, violence, drinking, processions, fairs, wakes, rowdy spectacle and outrageous clamour. Significantly, the carnivalesque expressed energies

¹¹ Habermas, J. (1993 : 427)

¹² Dahlgren, P. & Sparks, C. (1993 : 9)

¹³ Calhoun, C. (1993 : 33)

suppressed in modernized everyday life, as well as an alternative politics. As Stallybrass and White argue, even though “. . . its specular identifications could only be momentary, fleeting and partial - voyeuristic glimpses of a promiscuous loss of status and decorum” - the carnivalesque nevertheless contained a utopian urge, displacing, even inverting, the normal hierarchies.¹⁴

A related criticism of Habermas's work is that he paid too little attention to matters of culture and to the construction of identity - and this in spite of the fact that critical theory has always sought to address all those troublesome cultural question which traditional brands of Marxism were unable to tackle through standard materialist approaches. The methodological neglect of national and cultural variation in Habermas's empirical accounts reflects this omission, but perhaps more significant, according to Calhoun, was Habermas's failure to adequately explore the significance of a variety of popular social and political movements which cannot be assumed to be derivative of, or organized along similar lines to the activities of the bourgeois public sphere.¹⁵ Social and political movements are influential agencies of public discourse and democratic politics, and to disregard them is to give but a partial account of public life. For, as subsidiary “publics”, these movements serve to reorient the agenda of public discourse in competition with the dominant ideology and the hegemonic powers that would otherwise structure the attention of discourse.¹⁶

Moreover, as Strydom argues : “Over and above the institutionalization of science and business, on the one hand, the law and the political public sphere on the other, these movements are concerned with the institutional possibilities of an expressive form of life and their implications

¹⁴ Stallybrass, P. & White, A. (1994 : 284,292)

¹⁵ Calhoun, C. (1993 : 33)

¹⁶ Eley, G. (1993 : 326)

for the rationalization of society".¹⁷ Habermas, however, was unable to accomodate this dynamic, given the manner in which his private / public dichotomy imposes a neutralizing logic of differential identity by establishing qualification for publicness as a matter of abstraction from private identity.¹⁸ In so treating identities and interests as settled within the private world and then brought fully formed into the public sphere, Habermas was unable to grasp that discursive contestation and public deliberation are not simply a matter of working towards an already established common good ; rather, and quite crucially, they are an occasion for the constitution and clarification of interests.¹⁹

Habermas devotes precious little attention to this "identity politics". His concern is with the existence and possible extention of people's participation at a cognitive level of communication and discourse, and not with the physical and emotional dimensions of human experience and human action. As Strydom puts it, Habermas concentrates on consensual principles and obligations and does not come to terms with the problem of the expressive-symbolic foundations of society.²⁰ He thereby restricts the potentialities of modernity to one interpretation - that of problem-solving - and neglects the "world-disclosing" role of the public sphere, and the engagement of social movements - which Fraser calls "subaltern counterpublics"²¹ - in changing the cultural-symbolic foundations of society.

A central weakness of Habermas's argument, then, is its methodological and conceptual neglect of the existence of multiple, sometimes overlapping, or contending public spheres. Calhoun suggests a more pluralistic, more open approach to conceptualizing the public sphere, seeing it as ". . . a field of discursive connections, a network within which

¹⁷ Strydom, P. (1991 : 162)

¹⁸ Calhoun, C. (1993 : 35)

¹⁹ Fraser, N. (1993 : 129)

²⁰ Strydom, P. (1991 : 162)

²¹ Fraser, N. (1993 : 123)

there is a more or less even flow of communication, through clusters of relatively greater density of communication, with clusters organized around issues, categories, persons, or basic dynamics of larger society". As he continues : "The hegemony of bourgeois publicity was always incomplete and exercised within a field partly constituted by its relation to other insurgent discourses".²² Such "insurgent discourses" are of fundamental importance, for they participate in the restructuring of issues as well as identities, legitimating new voices and clarifying the old.

II .

A further consequence of Habermas's idealization of the circumstances in the period of bourgeois culture is an overestimation of the subsequent degeneration of the public sphere. Notwithstanding the methodological and conceptual reasons for this (some of which have been discussed above), the rest of this chapter argues that his thesis regarding the "refeudalization" of the public sphere, together with his (empirically inadequate) intonations on the power of the mass media and his exaggeration of the passivity of the audience, are unduly pessimistic. It argues, moreover, that they are in no small part a regression in his political theory, for they led him straight back into the cul-de-sac from which he originally sought to escape.

Habermas initially rejected the pessimism of his predecessors at the Frankfurt Institute, and took issue with their tendency to identify objectification with alienation, and with the implication that the solution to the latter problem lay in the abolition of the institutions of modern society. He wrote, for instance, that ". . . a tendency to underestimate certain functions of bourgeois or formal law (devised to guarantee liberties) was

²² Calhoun, C. (1993 : 38)

present in Marx and perpetuated by the earlier Frankfurt School.²³ In Habermas's opinion, without formal democracy based on universal principles and legal guarantees, substantive democracy is impossible.

However, his political theory in the second half of The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere remains too dependent on the work of the early Frankfurt School theorists : first, in terms of exaggerating the degree of economic systematicity and the cohesive nature of modern society ; second, with respect to his pessimistic view of the mass media as being instruments of manipulation in the hands of the state and giant corporations who have an interest in curtailing public discussion ; and third, in terms of his elitist view of the masses as an increasingly privatized, passive and manipulative audience that is subject to social control.

The Frankfurt School theorists were all united by the need for a critical Marxism, construed as involving a rejection of positivism, value-freedom, and crude materialism, while stressing the actual Hegelian and alleged idealist side of Marx himself. Their central concerns were the developmental characteristics of modern society and the fate of the individual in modern times, especially in terms of the culture industry and the commodification and social rationalization of cultural forms.

The first systematic elaboration of these themes was undertaken by Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer. In their famous work The Dialectic of Enlightenment, they argue that the "Light of Reason" had stopped short of a critique of its own structure, and had become a new and dangerous mythology, subjecting the world to the totalitarian command of technological domination. According to Adorno and Horkheimer's critique, mass culture and instrumental reason had captured the political stage to such a degree

²³ Habermas, J. (1979 : 148)

that no leverage point existed for effective political oppositional activity.²⁴ The reason for this, they argue, is that while the growth of knowledge has led to an increase in man's mastery over both external nature and the inner nature of human subjectivity, and an increased subordination of the natural world to the exercise of technical control, (scientific) instrumental reason's objectification of the world has also entailed the objectification of human beings themselves. The net result of this rationalizing development is a bureaucratizing logic of domination (enhanced by the commodification of labour power under capitalism) and "... an empty subjectivity which has lost the autonomy for whose sake the conquest of nature was initiated."²⁵

Adorno's subsequent work owed much to Georg Lukacs's concept of "reification" - which showed how social relations of production come to appear as qualities of *things* (what Marx called "commodity fetishism").²⁶ Adorno's general theory claims that in conformity with the two interconnected organizing principles of expanding commodification (through rules of equivalence) and reification, all capitalist social and political formations institutionalize and defend a "law of exchange", under the bewitching spell of which populations are increasingly fashioned as mere agents of commodification by an enchanted, totalitarian apparatus. The masses, he claimed, "... are not primary, but secondary, they are an object of calculation ; an appendage of the machinery".²⁷ What Adorno feared above all was that the spread of these exchange values and the mass production of art, together with the appearance-based nature of all forms of interaction and mediation, would stamp out the very essence of individuality.²⁸

²⁴ Robert Holub (1991 : 8) observes that the single qualification of this bleak picture is to be found in Adorno's valorization of certain types of esoteric art, but even this provides scant hope for any genuine political change.

²⁵ Buchanan, J. (1994 : 53)

²⁶ Lukacs, G. (1923), History and Class Consciousness

²⁷ Adorno, T. quoted in Thompson, J.B. (1990 : 99)

²⁸ Zipes, J. (1994 : 158)

Thus, with respect to the culture industry, Adorno and Horkheimer wrote that “. . . the individual is an illusion . . . tolerated only so long as his (*sic*) complete identification with the generality is unquestioned. Pseudo-individuality is rife : from the standardized jazz improvization to the exceptional film star whose hair curls over her eye to demonstrate her originality. What is individual is no more than the generality's power to stamp the accidental detail so firmly that it is accepted as such.”²⁹

For Adorno, big business, together with its all-persuasive technology, has apparently organized society in such a comprehensive manner that it has “. . . taken complete possession of the world and its imagination”, and the spread of the principle of exchange “. . . imposes on the whole world an obligation to become identical, to become total”.³⁰ Adorno believed that this rationalization process through identity thinking - whereby all that is novel and dissimilar is related to abstract quantities so that it can be calculated, manipulated and administered at will - and the subsequent bureaucratization of the world, comes to absorb the mind and atrophy the capacity of individuals to think and act in a critical and autonomous way. For Adorno this development is synonymous with anaesthetisation and depoliticisation of the masses.

Adorno extended his critique of bureaucratic consciousness by arguing that it was strengthened by the development of mass communications and the culture industry which, through the production and deployment of immediately intelligible, stereotypic, identitarian patterns of signs, enchants and stupifies consumers, ensnaring them within “pacified” relations of production. The masses of people thus become victims of a “pseudotransparency”. Made to believe that they are unique, different and original, they are at the same time compelled to conform to market conditions and subscribe to political systems whose major role is to explore

²⁹ Adorno, T. & Horkheimer, M., quoted in Woollacott, J. (1992 : 91-92)
³⁰ Adorno, T. quoted in Keane, J. (1984 : 71, 74)

every possible means of endorsing and spreading the capitalist production of commodities.³¹ In the Adornian scheme, the process of consumption is taken to be so compelling that it “. . . induces individuals to identify with the prevailing social norms and to continue to be as they already are”³², thereby occluding the need for any independent justification or defense of social reality. “In the limiting of the socially effective spirit to once again presenting to human beings only what in any case already constitutes the conditions of their existence but at the same time proclaiming this present existence as its own norm, the people are confirmed in their faithless faith in pure existence”.³³

Similarly, Herbert Marcuse claims that the productive apparatus and the goods and services it produces “. . . carry with them prescribed attitudes and habits, certain intellectual and emotional reactions which bind the consumers more or less pleasantly to the producers and, through the latter, to the whole”.³⁴ Even works of art succumb to the progressive commodification of cultural goods. Produced in terms of accumulation and profit realization, they lose their autonomy from the marketplace and come to be valued primarily for their exchangeability, rather than any intrinsic aesthetic quality. As Adorno and Horkheimer wrote in The Dialectic of Enlightenment: “The work of art, by completely assimilating itself to need, deceitfully deprives men of precisely that liberation from the principle of utility which it should inaugurate.”³⁵

Most products of the culture industry, observes J.B.Thompson, are for the most part “. . . symbolic constructs which are moulded according to certain pre-established formulae and impregnated with stereotypical settings, characters and themes. They do not challenge or diverge from existing social norms ; rather, they affirm these norms and censure any

³¹ Zipes, J. (1994 : 158)

³² Zipes, J. (1994 : 158)

³³ Adorno, T., quoted in Thompson, J.B. (1990 : 24)

³⁴ Marcuse, H. (1968 : 26)

³⁵ Adorno, T. & Horkheimer, M., quoted in Thompson, J.B. (1990 : 99)

actions or attitudes that deviate from them".³⁶ According to Marcuse, this leads to a situation overwhelmingly characterized by a "... pattern of one-dimensional thought and behaviour in which ideas, aspirations and objectives that, in their content, transcend the established universe or discourse and action are either repelled or reduced to the terms of this universe."³⁷

The media are seen as playing a crucial role in this "inoculation against subversion" by limiting the terms of discussion to questions of determining which techniques are best capable of managing the system as it is and of containing its contradictions. Through this "closing of the universe of discourse", the media are therefore considered to be an intrinsic part of the process of increasing rationalization and reification in modern societies, and complicitous in the retardation of critical, autonomous thought. While Marcuse's position is not that preconditioning *starts* with the mass production of radio and television - he argues that "... people enter into this stage as preconditioned receptacles of long standing ..." -³⁸ - such institutions are definitely accorded a significant "reinforcement effect" in his work. In his analysis of the American popular press, for instance, he argues that the "functionalized, abridged and unified language" leads to an "overwhelming concreteness" which, in constantly imposing *images*, militates against the development and expression of *concepts*. "In its immediacy and directness", he writes, "it impedes conceptual thinking ; thus, it impedes thinking".³⁹

³⁶ Thompson, J.B. (1990 : 100)

³⁷ Thompson, J.B. (1990 : 27)

³⁸ Marcuse, H. (1968)

³⁹ Marcuse, H. (1968 :84-85)

I am reminded here George Orwell's character Syme, the chilling destroyer of language in his novel 1984, who, speaking to Orwell's protagonist, Winston Smith, claimed that "... the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought. In the end we shall make thoughtcrime literally impossible, because there will be no words in which to express it. Every concept that can ever be needed will be expressed by *one* word, with its meaning rigidly defined and all its subsidiary meanings rubbed out and forgotten ... Every year fewer and fewer words, and the range of consciousness always a little smaller. Even now, of course, there's no reason or excuse for committing thoughtcrime. It's merely a question of self-

The media, then, from the perspective of the early Frankfurt School theorists, define the terms in which people "think" about the world. The intellectual *gestalt* which they condition is one which threatens to ". . . inhibit thought itself by inducing us to live, mentally, in a world of hypnotic definitions and automatic ideological equations which rule out any effective cognitive mediations on our part".⁴⁰ Weber's "iron cage" of rationalized, bureaucratic action and relentless self-interested calculation is therefore replaced by the "iron cage" of the culture industry, which absorbs the energy of individuals into the collective consumption of standardized goods and the pseudo-reality of a repetitive familiarity.

For the early critical theorists, the secularization of the human spirit through its instrumentalization effectively undermined the very "principle of culture" - that is, its teleological dimension, its spiritual essence. As Piccone maintains, in the political arena this "culturelessness" leads to a longing for authority, even that of an impersonal bureaucracy or dictatorship, while in everyday life it paves the way for the triumph of pseudo-culture : ". . . bleak existence - the soul which does not aspire to anything higher in life - requires substitute images for the divine which it obtains through pseudo-culture".⁴¹

Habermas seems to share the early Frankfurt School theorists' negative prognosis on the transition to a blind, fully administered world of bureaucratic unfreedom. This much is apparent from his thesis of "refeudalization", in which he decries the administrative silencing and processing of populations through the agencies of publicity and technocratic planning. Under conditions of late capitalism, he argues, ". . . politics . . . more and more contracts into administration and the [official] procurement of acclamation".⁴² Autonomous public life is discouraged by the state and

discipline, reality control. But in the end there won't be any need even for that. The Revolution will be complete when the language is perfect."

⁴⁰ Marcuse, H. (1968 : 85)

⁴¹ Piccone, P. (1993 : 4-5)

⁴² Habermas, J. quoted in Keane, J. (1984 : 90)

elites because substantive democratization processes would overload this already pressurized apparatus with demands that, in turn, might bring to popular consciousness the contradiction between the state's socialization of production and its continuing dependence upon the private appropriation of surplus value. The officially sanctioned relation of citizens to the state, according to Keane's interpretation of Habermas's thesis, becomes ". . . not one of political participation, but of a general attitude of expectation, of anticipation of welfare, but not an attempt to actually determine decisions".⁴³ In line with the structural transformation of "publicity" - from a principle of political truth-seeking to a principle of commercial production - so the *activity* of "the public" itself undergoes a transition from *producing* culture to *consuming* culture.

Given this Kafkaesque imagery of individuals increasingly locked into a world of total administration, it is not surprising that Keane claims that under conditions of late capitalism, ". . . the attenuation of truly participatory decision-making is not fortuitous".⁴⁴ As Piccone observes : "The reduction of 'the people' to an abstract quantifiable mass 'democratically' approving or disapproving whatever pre-constituted agenda is placed before them, or voting for candidate and parties that operate within a political sphere with no organic roots in active public life, is not democracy but manipulation".⁴⁵ This is precisely Keane's point - that the political stage is one in which manipulative opinion makers systematically tap existing fantasies, prejudices and unconscious motives in order to create a deferential, follow-the-leader disposition among the citizenry. In other words, whatever form of public life that does exist under organized, state-managed capitalism is only retained as a cynical means to justify and explain the dramatic increase of bureaucratic state and corporate activity. The social order becomes increasingly depoliticized as individuals become more prone to public deference and private orientation towards career,

⁴³ Habermas, J. quoted in cited Keane, J. (1985 : 90)

⁴⁴ Keane, J. (1984 : 89)

⁴⁵ Piccone, P. (1993 : 10)

leisure and consumption. "Having fallen into the arms of bureaucratic servitude", Keane writes, "the citizens no longer deliberate ; they are expected to adore cheerfully or curse silently".⁴⁶

In the Habermasian scheme, history has not been kind to the public sphere. Whereas it was once championed as a non-private domain insulated from the state and the market which enabled the formation of public opinion on the basis of rational discourse, its subsequent degeneration and "refeudalization" at the hands of the "culture industry" have involved a new and destructive "de-differentiation" of the public and the private.⁴⁷ Habermas clearly believed the media to be highly complicitous in the decline of the critical capabilities of individuals and groups. This is patently obvious from his "refeudalization" thesis, which holds that representation and appearances outweigh rational debate, and which sees the transformation of the free exchange of ideas among equals into less democratic communicative forms such as public relations.

It ought to be noted, however, that such an indictment of mass communication is hardly unusual, nor for that matter unique to the neo-Marxism of the Frankfurt School tradition of critical theory. The role of the mass media in shaping individuals' behaviour and public opinion, and in inducing conformity to middle class values and so strengthening the power of the dominant elites is also evident in works such as C.Wright Mills's White Collar (1951) and The Power Elites (1956). Indeed, Mills' discussion in the latter work of the shift from a social order of "publics" or "communities" (in which individuals participate in political and social debate and action) to a "mass society" anticipates Habermas's theory in several ways. For not only does Mills argue that the mass media are crucial in this transformation - because they shift "the ration of givers of opinion to the receivers" in favour of small groups of elites who control, or have

⁴⁶ Keane, J. (1984 : 89-93)
⁴⁷ Crook, S. (1991)

access to, the mass media - but he also illustrates the way in which the mass media engage in one-way communication that does not allow feedback, thus obliterating another feature of a democratic public sphere.

As Jensen points out, “. . . the media has been attacked by radicals, conservatives and liberals, by those to whom they are addressed, by elites and by populists, by teachers, preachers, politicians and journalists, in the name of such values as art, truth, morality, democracy, knowledge, experience, and ‘the people’.”⁴⁸ For such critics, she claims, the media have come to embody all that is tainted in life, being blamed both for the corruption of previous innocence and the deflection from a previous path. Thus we have commentators within the Anglo-American tradition of media studies following a narrative structure which proceeds from seduction to transgression to pollution to doom, moving from individual effects to social influence to historical trajectory without missing a beat. Irrespective whether the focus is on media content or media form, such commentaries are all driven by the notion of a media-induced societal decline. In Neil Postman's scathing indictment of television, for example, Americans are identified as being the best entertained, but also “. . . quite likely the least-informed people in the Western world.”⁴⁹

Within this perspective, the media are endowed with a seductive power, and individuals are seen as being naturally drawn to the very junk that trivializes their tastes, blurs their minds, subverts their desires and destroys their reason.⁵⁰ Thus, according to Giovanni's notion of “video-power”, the medium's “. . . dramatization of the trivial is joined to the atrophy of

⁴⁸ Jensen, J. (1990 : 18)

⁴⁹ Postman, N. (1987 : 106) See also Dwight MacDonald's Against the American Grain, (New York : Random House, 1962) ; Daniel Boorstin's The Image : A Guide to the Pseudo-events in America, (New York : Atheneum, 1972) ; and Stuart Ewen's Captains of Consciousness : Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture, (New York : McGraw-Hill, 1976)

⁵⁰ The suggestion, as Michael Real (1989 : 20-21) observes, is that we are Don Quixote's heirs, for, like the hero of Cervantes's novel, our behaviour and consciousness have been dramatically distorted by our undisciplined media saturation.

understanding" in what he calls an "opium vortex" : when it is discovered that people like opium, they are given opium, and then they come to want more and more opium, until a stage is reached when they want opium only.⁵¹ Similar to Habermas's prognosis, media content and media form are such that they seduce us into affection for them, with the final destructive power of this medium lying in its ability to cultivate us in its image - to turn us into itself.

"Once we have succumbed to its siren song, we become the worst of its qualities - aesthetically banal, cognitively confused, ideologically swaddled consumers who are (on top of everything else) epistemologically silly".⁵² Consequently, we can no longer differentiate "... art from trash, truth from illusion, persuasion from information, logic from silliness. Our perceptions have become permanently defiled, we are no longer able to distinguish the legitimate from the ersatz".⁵³ In short, what was once a creature capable of mental abstraction and informed political discrimination has been reduced - by addiction to its technological forms - to "... a touch-button man ... whose mental horizon is the eye-ball".⁵⁴

However, as Jensen maintains, the despair of such ontologically-bare social narratives - in which the media *per se*, by the force of their own technological imperative, control the very shaping of the *homo sapiens* - is nothing more than a self-serving critique designed to place the blame for our contaminated present and dismal future outside of ourselves.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Sartori, G., (1989 : 51)
 Similarly, Terence McKenna (1992 : 218-9) maintains that the nearest analogy to the addictive power of television is probably heroin. "Heroin", he writes, "flattens the image ; with heroin, things are neither hot nor cold ; the junkie looks out at the world certain that whatever it is, it does not matter. The illusion of knowing and of control that heroin engenders is analogous to the conscious assumption of the TV consumer that what is seen is 'real' somewhere in the world. In fact, what is seen are the cosmetically enhanced surfaces of product. TV, while chemically non-invasive, nevertheless is every bit as addicting and physiologically damaging as any other drug."
⁵² Jensen, J. (1990 : 172-3)
⁵³ Jensen, J. (1990 : 173)
⁵⁴ Sartori, G. (1989 : 53)
⁵⁵ Jensen, J. (1990 : 178)

Notwithstanding the obvious - that the world displayed on the screen is not the world of real people, and is, as Sartori rightly insists, “. . . an amputated and deeply distorted reality”⁵⁶ - the fact remains that such media are *man-made* forms. That is to say, they are of cultural significance *because human beings make and use them*, and their social influence and historical trajectory will always be determined by the ways in which they are understood and the uses to which they are put.

This is a crucial point to keep in mind as one considers new electronic communication and information media. Before one pass judgement, that is, one should apply oneself to understanding how they work, and rather than simply accepting or rejecting such technologies wholesale, one should be more selective and discriminating in the use one make of them.⁵⁷ To do otherwise would be peurile and self-defeating. As Bertolt Brecht astutely observes : “Anyone who advises us not to make use of such new apparatus (the media) just confirms the right of the apparatus to do bad work ; he forgets himself out of sheer open-mindedness, for he is thus proclaiming his willingness to have nothing but dirt produced for him”.⁵⁸

It is about time, J.B.Thompson urges, that we stop interpreting the ever-growing role of mediated communication as an historical fall from grace, and apply ourselves to understanding the new kind of publicity and the distinctive kind of visibility afforded by such media. To this end there are certain facts which we cannot ignore. First, we now live in an age of media saturation in which the technologization of culture has rendered “reality” increasingly representational and increasingly imaginary ; and

⁵⁶ Sartori, G. (1989 : 44)

⁵⁷ Michael Real (1989 : 261) makes a similar point in his study of “super media” : “The same vehicles that bring us Hemingway and Faulkner, Milos Forman and Ingrid Bergman, Garrison Keillor and Florence Joyner, also bring us slasher movies, Morton Downey Jr. and Hustler. Great art, captivating movies, engrossing sports, useful data, and challenging political information share airtime and copy space with ecological disintegration, a demographic explosion, political oppression, and economic disequilibrium. The task, personally and collectively, is to appreciate the best, change the worst, and struggle to recognize the difference”.
⁵⁸ Brecht, B. On Theatre, (1964 : 47), quoted in Bennett, T. (1992a :47)

second, technology *per se* has become ontologically significant of the democratic subject.⁵⁹ Mark Poster's "mode of information" thesis neatly elaborates on these points, and demonstrates the way in which electronic systems of communication are changing the fabric of advanced societies, and transfiguring the structure of human interactions on a scale comparable to the industrial revolution of the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Poster argues that electronic communication - as a new language experience - radically alters the positional intentions of individuals in determinate institutional frameworks. The new level of interconnectivity, he contends, heightens the fragility of social networks, as the new communicational structures in which information circulates reconfigures the relation (distance) between the emitter and receiver, between the message and its context. "In the mode of information", Poster writes, ". . . the subject is no longer located in a point in absolute time / space, enjoying a physical, fixed vantage point from which rationally to calculate its options. Instead it is multiplied by databases, dispersed by computer messaging and conferencing, decontextualized and reidentified by TV ads, dissolved and materialized continuously in the electronic transmission of symbols".⁶⁰ James Buchanan elucidates on this profound restructuring and reinscription of ordinary lived reality. As he observes, it is not so much a question of being on the telephone or the "net", or engaging the mass media, or any one of the many versions of cyberspace now available, but rather ". . . the way in which the increasing ubiquity of such new spaces are constitutive of the subjects we are in spaces which are not so mediated".⁶¹

A fundamental restructuring of the fields of symbolic exchange and practical relationship is therefore taking place, in which the time and space relations of communicators are radically altered and the codes of language profoundly transformed by a new economy of representation. As Poster

⁵⁹ Buchanan, J. (1996) This quote is from p.12 of an unpublished version.
⁶⁰ Poster, M. (1990 : 15)

⁶¹ Buchanan, J. (1996) This quote is from p.23 of an unpublished version.

observes, the moment is passed when language practices are subject to the old contestatory positions. "The factory site", he argues, "... with its massed, impoverished workers, no longer presents, for so many reasons, the opportunity of revolutionary talk. If contestatory language is to emerge today, it must do so in the context of TV ads and databases, of computer and communication satellites, not in a culture of co-present talk or consensual debate".⁶²

The study therefore contends that it would be counter-productive to remain wedded to a frame of reference and a mode of analysis based on conceptual and empirical models of language and communications as historically outdated as Habermas's. As Poster argues, Habermas's position (on the relation between language and society) "... deflects attention from the emergent and generally prevailing language condition." What typifies advanced society, Poster argues, "... is not so much the opposite of justice, truth and compassion, but language situations which operate at a different register from that of co-present, contextual self-monitoring talk or the ideal speech situation. The theoretical / political problem today is not to contextualize the conditions of free speech but to account for the way actual language situations contain structures of domination and potentials for emancipatory language".⁶³

However, Habermas's model of communication and his theoretical strategies following The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere prove incapable of analysing both the new de-spatialized and non-dialogical media, and the changing terrain upon which they operate. This is unfortunate (given the overall value of the above-mentioned work), for unless we account for this new media context, we will struggle to adequately analyse the degree to which ideology and domination are embedded in new technologies, and the logic and dynamic of social power

⁶² Poster, M. (1990 : 80)
⁶³ Poster, M. (1990 : 80)

in the cultural and political fields. As James Buchanan claims, "[the] mode of information offers new opportunities and new threats to the democratic imagination. Any theory of democracy which fails to take into account the fact of this shift into a mode of information risks being irrelevant to the actual practice of democracy."⁶⁴

While the following chapters will be concerned to broaden our analytical horizon and exploring new intellectual terrains in order to properly deal with the problem of democracy and ideology in modern "informationalizing" societies,⁶⁵ the rest of this chapter will explain why this is a necessary undertaking.

III.

Jean Cohen contends that consequent on his pessimistic conclusions in The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, Habermas's subsequent efforts are inevitably based on a fundamental contradiction. For his assertion that the principles of the bourgeois public sphere still inform political life is at odds with his argument that there is a radical institutional discontinuity between the late capitalist state and its predecessors.⁶⁶

Habermas's discussion of the liberal public sphere centred on the fact that the principles of individual autonomy, personhood, democracy, freedom, enlightenment and critical public opinion, etc. were rooted in social institutions which gave these norms a certain *veritas in re*. However, as Cohen observes, Habermas's historical analysis concludes by arguing that

⁶⁴ Buchanan, J. (1996) This quote is from p.18 of an unpublished version.

⁶⁵ Following Luke (1983 : 62) : "Informationalization represents the new dominance of data-intensive techniques, cybernetic-knowledge and electronic technologies as the strategic resource in corporate production. The invention, production, management and distribution of *information* - as words, numbers, images or audio - now overshadows the manufacture of goods or provision of services in the truly advanced capitalist economies".

⁶⁶ Cohen, J. (1979 : 82)

"... these institutions have been so transformed through state interventionism and rationalization as to render the previously mentioned norms increasingly abstract and remote".⁶⁷ Habermas's thesis, in other words, maintains that the entire institutional framework of modern society has been radically altered, with the state and society being integrated without the detour of the functioning public realm. The consequence of state penetration into the public sphere, and the growth of semi-political corporate bodies within civil society is the erosion of the norms once inherent in the constitutions of formal democracies.

And yet Habermas insists that the principles enshrined in the image of the liberal public sphere still exist. For at the end of The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere he pictures the possibility of a democratic transformation through the internal democratization of a number of institutions whose activities impinge on the formal political process of decision making. In Habermas's opinion, the only imaginable vehicle of critical publicity is internally democratized associations and parties : "... intraparty and intra-associational public spheres appeared to me as the potential centres of a public communication still capable of being regenerated".⁶⁸ Similarly : "There is only one way to push back the boundaries ... between lifeworld and systems without those forces that are the most probable historically - that means without weapons, without bribery and without money, without legal oppression, and so on. The only way is to radicalize those institutions that we have already established in Western countries, to direct them toward a form of radical democracy that makes it possible, just in terms of delegitimation, to change or at least to affect administration".⁶⁹ "The goal", Habermas maintains, "... is no longer to supercede an economic system having a capitalist life of its own and a system of domination having a bureaucratic life of its own but to erect a

⁶⁷ Cohen, J. (1979 : 93)

⁶⁸ Habermas, J. (1993 : 469)

⁶⁹ Habermas, J. (1993 : 469-70)

democratic dam against the colonizing encroachment of system imperatives on areas of the lifeworld".⁷⁰

This argument foreshadows the arguments of Legitimation Crisis, a work which retains the essential idea of "refeudalisation", but which attempts to recover the valuable critical ideal of the bourgeois public sphere. What Habermas is essentially arguing is that while one cannot go back to the liberal public sphere (this would "... only serve to weaken even more the residual functions genuinely remaining within it"), one must still struggle to find a form of democratic public discourse that can salvage critical reason in an age of large-scale institutions and fuzzy boundaries between state and society.⁷¹

Habermas suggests that this be achieved by the "... long march through the institutions" ; that is to say, by internally democratizing and subjecting to critical publicity all parties, parastatal agencies and bureaucracies. The media, for instance, need a mechanism that would ensure more democratic access and selection in order to counter the concentration of ownership and the increasing scale of media institutions. There is, according to Habermas, no alternative to a politics based on negotiation of interests among organized interest groups, but one can reverse the trend and make these organizations more open to rational-critical discourse.

For Habermas, the idea of "publicity" is the fundamental principle of democracy and can only realized when personal opinions can evolve through the rational-critical debate of a public into public opinion. However, based on his understanding of the occasions permitting discursive will formation under contemporary conditions, as institutionalized in the mass democracy of the welfare state, he seems to be prepared to amend this

⁷⁰ Habermas, J. (1993 : 444)

⁷¹ Habermas, J. (1993 : 208)

principled position. For he argues that "publicity" is "... realizable only as a rationalization ... of the exercise of societal and political power under the mutual control of rival organizations themselves committed to publicity as regards both their internal structures and their interactions with one another, and with the state".⁷²

Habermas's problem is that he cannot ultimately ground his hopes for even this rationalized realization of the idea of publicity. Unable to find any institutional basis for an effective political public sphere corresponding in character and function to that of early capitalism and state formation but corresponding in scale and participation to the realities of later capitalism and state, "... he can neither situate his utopia of political freedom, nor identify a dynamic pressing toward its realization. Thus, confronted with his argument that the rationalized and reified institutions of the welfare state render democratic norms increasingly irrelevant, Habermas is forced into abstract and formal theoretical strategies.

Applying the brush with broad strokes, we can say that Habermas follows several such strategies after The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere⁷³ :

1. In Towards a Rational Society, (1970), Habermas sets out to answer the question, "How is it possible, in our technological era, to meaningfully reflect upon the relation between technical progress and the social life-world, and to bring it under the control of rational discussion?" Until now, he argues, the mediation between technical progress and the practical conduct of life in industrially advanced societies has taken place without direction - "as a mere continuation of natural history". His concern, therefore, in the face of the contemporary challenge of technology, is to make "an energetic

⁷² Habermas, J. (1993 : 210)

⁷³ The discussion which follows is indebted to Fred Dallmayr, insofar as it draws extensively from a collection of his essays entitled Polis and Praxis (1986).

attempt" to consciously take this mediation in hand.⁷⁴ Within Habermas's critical theoretical approach, moral-practical arguments are always given a broader significance than within empirical-scientific inquiry.⁷⁵ This is reflected upon in Towards a Rational Society, in which he sets out to bring the power of technical control within the range of the consensus of acting and transacting citizens.⁷⁶ This can be accomplished, he contends, by "... setting in motion a politically effective discussion that brings together the social potential constituted by technical know-how into a rationally defined and controlled relation to our practical knowledge and will."⁷⁷ As Dallmayr observes, Habermas immediately dismisses as facile two customary responses to the challenge of technology : that science and technology are the necessary harbingers of democracy, or that technology necessarily destroys democracy. In Habermas's opinion, it will not suffice for society to match the conditions of technical rationality, for "... even if the cybernetic dream of a virtually instinctive self-stabilization could be realized, the value system would have contracted in the meantime to a set of rules for the maximization of power and comfort".⁷⁸ The contemporary problem of technology, in other words, cannot be met with technology alone. As Habermas writes : "The substance of domination is not dissolved by the power of technical control ; to the contrary, the former can simply hide behind the latter. The irrationality of domination, which today has

⁷⁴ Dallmayr, F. (1984 : 60)

⁷⁵ Fred Dallmayr (1984 : 186) observes that while empirical science, in Habermas's view, "... is ultimately geared to the goal of human mastery or 'control' of the environment and is thus guided by a 'technical interest', ethical evaluation is rooted in interpersonal contacts and communicative interaction, which, in turn, are governed by a 'practical interest' in mutual understanding and in the maintenance of just or justifiable norms of conduct". Habermas later developed these thoughts in Theory of Communicative Action, in which he differentiates between three competing action types : namely, "teleological (or purposive-rational) action", "norm-regulated action", and "dramaturgical action".

⁷⁶ Such acting and consenting citizens he believed to be capable of radical reflection and self-reflection - a capacity he later described as man's interest in "emancipation" (1978), and still later, as the basis and mainspring of rational discourse. (1975b)

⁷⁷ Dallmayr, F. (1984 : 60-1)

⁷⁸ Dallmayr, F. (1984 : 52, 53, 57)

become a collective peril, could be mastered only through the development of a political decision-making process tied to the principle of general discussion free from domination".⁷⁹

Another concern in Towards a Rational Society is with what Habermas called the "scientization of politics". Here he turns his attention to the possibility of effective democratic public opinion in the face of a growing tendency for bureaucrats and politicians to orient themselves along strictly scientific guidelines in the exercise of their public functions. Habermas discusses this changing relationship in terms of three models. In the first model, which Habermas calls a "decisionist" model, ". . . the politician is the ultimate authority, making arbitrary choices while employing technical expertise only in the selection of means".⁸⁰ In the second construal - that is, in the so-called "technocratic" model - the politician has become dependent on the professional. The politician, that is, has become ". . . the mere agent of a scientific intelligentsia which, in concrete circumstances, elaborates the objective requirements of available techniques and resources as well as of optimal strategies and steering regulations".⁸¹ Habermas's preference is clearly for the third model, the practical-dialectical, or "pragmatistic", model, in which a "critical interaction" comes to replace the strict separation between the function of the "expert" and the politician. Here we see reminders of his early work on the public sphere, for, in the pragmatistic model, the transposition of technical recommendations into practice is ". . . increasingly dependent on mediation by the public as a political institution".⁸² It must be noted, however, that given his views on the erosion of the public sphere and the pervasive collusion of bureaucracy and expertise, Habermas is not optimistic about the feasibility of

⁷⁹ Dallmayr, F. (1986 : 61)
⁸⁰ Dallmayr, F. (1986 : 62)
⁸¹ Dallmayr, F. (1986 : 64)
⁸² Dallmayr, F. (1986 : 68)

establishing this third model. As he puts it, technology can only be effectively integrated with social understanding “. . . under the ideal conditions of general communication extending to the entire public and free from domination”.⁸³

2. Habermas's concern for the instrumentalization of political and economic life, and the implications of the absence of anything approaching a “practical discourse” yielding a binding rational consensus among all participants, is a theme taken up in Legitimation Crisis. His focus in this work is thus the unintended consequences of the logic and limitations of the rationalization of social and political life, and the consequences of extensive state intervention into the economy in particular. Organized, welfare state capitalist systems, he argues, continually generate disorganizing effects. They are systematically marked by their failure to eliminate the cyclical dynamics of the capitalist commodification process; by discrepancies between the state and corporate planning; by state planning that chronically fails to achieve its goals; and by threatening patterns of mass disloyalty and political protest. As Claus Offe maintains, the technocratic and apolitical manner of reacting to emerging social pressures dooms the welfare state to an endless and aimless process of self-adaption, causing the state to generate as many problems as it is able to solve, often just shifting the problem from one area to another.⁸⁴

According to Habermas, then, processes of bureaucratization exhibit self-crippling tendencies, which undermine the quest for coherence and legitimacy. Unrealistic goals and modes of operation weaken the conditions of depoliticization upon which they depend for their continued reproduction. As Keane argues, late capitalism is a contradictory unity, whose naturalizing tendencies are counteracted by a falling rate of the

⁸³ Dallmayr, F. (1986 : 75)
⁸⁴ Offe, C. (1972 : 485)

production and reproduction of meaningful socio-political relations. Such mass loyalty problems reduce the capacity of ruling groups to motivate and discipline their dependents, a failure exacerbated by the psychic stress induced by the mechanizations and privatization of everyday life and by the motivational boredom attending the erosion of leisure and consumption as meaningful activities.⁸⁵ This triggers widespread searches for autonomous and meaningful political activity beyond the organized precincts of bureaucratic life.

3. Habermas's next strategy is to attempt a reconceptualization of his theory of society along the lines of a division between system and life-world. Thus, in The Theory of Communicative Action, he develops "... a highly-generalized model of social processes as 'interchange' between functionally organized economic and administrative systems, on the one hand, and the 'components' of the communicatively structured 'life-world', on the other."⁸⁶ According to Hugh Baxter, this model grounds not only Habermas's account of the "social pathologies" of modern, particularly advanced capitalist societies, but also his reformulation of Lukacs's theory of reification, which, in Habermas's analysis, becomes a theory of the "colonization" of the communicatively structured life-world by the economic and administrative systems. That is, "reification" is conceived as the progressive monetarization and bureaucratization of a society's "communicative infrastructure", a process which threatens the reproduction of that society.⁸⁷

Habermas now maintains that the state and economy are systematically organized fields of action that can no longer be transformed democratically from within. In fact, he goes so far as to argue that to attempt to do so would be to threaten their capacity to function according to their specific logic, with potentially disastrous

⁸⁵ Keane, J. (1984 : 110)
⁸⁶ Baxter, H. (1987 : 39)
⁸⁷ Baxter, H. (1987 : 39)

consequences. The task of a radical programme of democratization should, instead, be to push back the colonizing intrusion of system imperatives into the lifeworld, and thereby achieve a new balance between the forms of societal integration so that the practically oriented demands of the lifeworld can prevail over the exercise of economic and administrative power.

4. Habermas then shifts his attention to the validity claims universally implicit in all speech as a basis for democratic will formation. According to Habermas, what he terms the "ideal speech situation" will produce a rational society, and solve the main problem of the undemocratic character of technology. This approach clearly follows on from Towards a Rational Society, in which he argued for the need to set in motion "... a politically effective discussion that rationally brings together the social potential constituted by technical knowledge and ability into a defined and controlled relation to our practical knowledge and will". In this earlier work he argued that the only medium for promoting anything like (genuine) rationalization of the power structure is "... public, unrestricted and unconstrained discussion of the suitability and desirability of action-orienting principles and norms in the light of the socio-cultural repressions of developing subsystems of instrumental behaviour ... at all levels of political and repoliticized decision-making processes".⁸⁸ In developing this line of thought - that is, from thought developing through unrestricted dialogue, through to his notion of the "ideal speech situation" and its criteria of comprehensibility, truth, sincerity and rightness - Habermas's aim is to develop the means by which language can be used to analyse the distortions introduced into speech by social modes of domination. Arguing for the apodicticity of the concept of the ideal speech situation - as a necessary condition for the comprehension of any utterance - Habermas maintains that the failure to meet its conditions does not indicate an individual's failure

⁸⁸ Habermas, J. (1970 : 118-9)

to communicate. Rather, deviations from the ideal speech situation "... increase correspondingly to the varying degrees of repression which characterize the institutional system within a given society".⁸⁹ In what amounts to an evolutionary account of human communicative competence, we see the final abandonment of his earlier historically specific and social-institutional strategy, and the beginnings of his theory of communicative action as the basis for reviving Kantian ideals - and more generally democratic ideals - in a world still torn asunder and subjected to domination by capitalism and bureaucratic power.

Fred Dallmayr observes that the most significant innovation of Habermas's Theory of Communicative Action is his "... departure from the traditional 'philosophy of consciousness' (or subjectivity) dating back to Descartes and Kant, and his resolute turn towards language and intersubjective communication".⁹⁰ This elevation of speech and communication to primary categories of sociological theory is not, as Dallmayr rightly observes, a novel feature of Habermas's opus, for even in The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, Habermas "... deplored the progressive dismantling of public debate and communication in favour of technical-functional imperatives".⁹¹

What distinguishes Habermas's later study, however, is his attempt to further elaborate what he referred to in Knowledge and Human Interests as "... a use of language not confined to the limits of technical control over objectified natural processes - a use which arises from symbolically mediated interactions between social subjects who know and recognize each other as unique individuals."⁹² Habermas's Theory of Communicative Action, in other words, seeks to distinguish between two different uses of knowledge : on the one hand, *cognitive-instrumental rationality*, which

⁸⁹ Habermas, J. (1979 : 144)

⁹⁰ Dallmayr, F. (1984 : 224)

⁹¹ Dallmayr, F. (1984 : 225)

⁹² Habermas, J. (1978 : 137), quoted in Dallmayr, F. (1984 : 225)

connotes “. . . successful self-preservation, rendered possible through informed control over, and intelligent adaptation to, the conditions of a contingent environment” ; and, on the other, *communicative rationality*, which carries with it connotations “. . . which ultimately derive from the central experience of the quietly unifying, consensus-producing function of argumentative speech where participants overcome their initial subjective views and, through the bond of rationally grounded convictions, assure themselves both of the unity of the objective world and the intersubjectivity of their life context”.

Habermas's work, therefore, seeks to enunciate a communicative praxis which, besides factual assertions, includes intersubjective norms and modes of self-reflection and self-expression which, against the backdrop of a “life-world”, “. . . aims at the attainment, preservation and renewal of consensus - more specifically of a consensus resting on the intersubjective recognition of arguable validity claims”.⁹³

In support of these rational-discursive modes of communication, Habermas differentiates “communicative action” from three competing sociological “action types” : namely, “teleological (or purposive-rational) action”, “norm-regulated action”, and “dramaturgical action”. As Dallmayr elucidates, *teleological action* refers to “strategic action”, that is, action defined by the standard of rational “efficiency” , in which a “one-world” mentality aims at achieving an objective through the most appropriate means possible ; *norm-regulated action* refers to a consensual activity among member of a social group, in which a prevailing consensus exists among group members as to accepted norms and values ; while *dramaturgical action* involves the self-disclosure of agents in front of each other, in which the actor “. . . evokes in his audience a particular image or impression by means of a more or less deliberate revelation of his

⁹³ Dallmayr, F. (1984 : 225)

subjectivity".⁹⁴ According to Habermas's theory, communicative action is distinguished from these sociological types by both encompassing all of them, and, being fundamentally rooted in the medium of language, because it corrects the one-sidedness of each alternative approach.

Thus, in teleological action, language ". . . serves merely as a subordinate means for utilitarian calculations", and ". . . only as a reservoir of cultural values or an instrument of self-display" in normative and dramaturgical action respectively⁹⁵. Only in the communicative model is language presupposed ". . . as a medium of unrestricted consensual interaction in which speakers and hearers make simultaneous reference to aspects of the objective, social and subjective worlds, against the backdrop of their pre-interpreted life-world."⁹⁶ Only in the communicative model of action, Habermas continues, is language relevant ". . . from the pragmatic angle that speakers, by uttering statements in a communicative fashion, enter into distinct world-relations" and that they do so ". . . in a reflexive manner". Communicative action, in other words, is therefore a "mechanism of coordination", in the sense that participants ". . . reach agreement on the claimed *validity* of their utterances, and thus grant intersubjective recognition to reciprocally raised *validity claims*"⁹⁷

Habermas is now arguing that the only model of rationalized political action which can be regarded as retaining a necessary link with democratic processes is that which he calls "pragmatic". Here he links up to Dewey in constructing a model of communication ". . . based on a historically determined pre-understanding, governed by social norms, of what is practically necessary in a concrete situation".⁹⁸ An effective public sphere, and therefore a democratic polity, he maintains, must rest on ". . . a

⁹⁴ Dallmayr, F. (1984 : 228-9)

⁹⁵ Dallmayr, F. (1984 : 229)

⁹⁶ Habermas, J. (1984 : 94-6)

⁹⁷ Habermas, J. (1984 : 98-9)

⁹⁸ Habermas, J. (1984 : 68-9)

consciousness that can only be enlightened hermeneutically, through articulation in a discourse of citizens in a community".⁹⁹

The public sphere is therefore no longer defined solely in terms of its position in an array of institutions, but rather with reference to the formal characteristics of patterns of communication. In so abandoning his consideration of the public sphere as a social institution - ie. one located in a particular relation to other institutions within a "topology of social spaces" - Habermas follows the hermeneutic theme of critical philosophy by identifying the virtues of the public sphere with the virtues of a particular type of communication, located within a "typology of discourse".¹⁰⁰ Unfortunately, as Crook observes, Habermas's ". . . metaphysical, even theological, discovery of the rational in the structures of the real" is a made at the price of a peculiar kind of impotence. As he puts it : "Habermas's insight cannot easily be put to work in concrete problems which might be experiences in 'everyday' practice." ¹⁰¹

Habermas's theoretical departure from his previously laudable social-institutional approach therefore undermines his subsequent political theory. Cohen is one critic who faults Habermas for seriously neglecting the analysis of the institutionalization of civil society which, she argues, ". . . constitutes the normative continuity of modernity and is the terrain of social struggles". Instead of addressing the macro-institutional level - which, it seems is only relevant to his theory to the extent it is disempowered - the focus of Habermas's theory of action is divided between the abstract level of cultural development and the micro-level of individual socialization (the personality system posited as *the* carrier of universalistic culture). As Cohen notes, this tends to obscure the real locus of the tension between norm and reality by blocking any analysis of the emancipatory moments of the family, civil society and the family. In a sense, then, Habermas's ". . .

⁹⁹ Habermas, J. (1984 : 69)
¹⁰⁰ Crook, S. (1991 : 108-122)
¹⁰¹ Crook, S. (1991 : 121)

attempt to build a dynamic theory of late capitalism has been bought at the price of a theory that might locate action-orienting, emancipatory norms in objective institutions".¹⁰²

Bookchin also condemns Habermas's shift away from Hegel and Marx's phenomenological strategy towards the formal, arguing that the reality from which he draws ". . . is so thinned of its living substance, particularity and potentialities that formal schemata become substitutes for dialectics and organic development". Consequently, the ". . . unfulfilled ideality latent in communicative action becomes a mere seed that lies in the concrete ; it requires a social medium in which to sprout - one that is repeatedly diluted by the importance Habermas ascribes to systems of ideas".

According to Bookchin, Habermas's politics is as arbitrary and as trite as his "communicative ethics", as they ". . . existentially lend themselves to almost any interpretation one chooses to give them under the rubric of an 'emancipatory interest'." ¹⁰³ Yet what is most disquieting for Bookchin is that Habermas forecloses the possibility of determining the *institutions* that will *materialize* the norms for an "ideal-speech situation" by presuming that under existing conditions of constraints of discourse it is impossible to discursively formulate the very substantive details for his emancipatory ideals. ¹⁰⁴ For Habermas, communicative competence is a historical phenomenon, with the moral-practical dimension of consciousness - considered decisive for structures of interaction - being largely determined by changes in social organization. This evolutionary theory therefore implies that it is only beyond capitalism that communicative competence will enable, and social freedom will allow, the realization of the ideal speech situation.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² Cohen, J. (1979 : 94)

¹⁰³ Bookchin, M. (1982 : 80-1)

¹⁰⁴ Bookchin, M. (1982 : 90-1)

¹⁰⁵ Poster, M. (1981 : 465-6)

What is urgently required is further critical theoretical reflection upon the institutional forms of communication capable of realizing and securing autonomous public spheres. This does not involve abolishing the state, or instituting, in some quasi-mystical fashion, spontaneous and rational agreement among speaking and acting subjects. Rather, it involves an elaboration of the principles of democratic legitimation in conjunction with an analysis of existing and potential structures of the political sphere, and a critical yet open analysis of the nature and impact of contemporary channels of communication on such structures.

For his part, Habermas, some might argue, steers clear from confronting this "raw reality" of everyday life, preferring instead the privileged ideational operations of some ethereal realm of interaction (the realm of freedom), which only succeeds in reducing the subject to the level of a *res cogitans* forever seeking a consensus among equally abstract agents. As Mark Poster puts it, it is difficult to empirically evaluate conversation according to Habermas's criteria, for the concept of the "ideal speech situation" implies a "...God-like epistemological vantage point from which the foibles of everyday confusion could be sorted out".¹⁰⁶

In Jensen's opinion, Habermas fell victim to the type of communicative utopia that the critique of ideology was designed to deconstruct, for not only does his historical perspective reify the public sphere, but the notion is "...ontologized in the systemic perspective, as an autonomous domain of time-out meaning production".¹⁰⁷ Habermas's model of the ideal speech situation - as the only legitimate context for making political decisions - exemplifies the utopian idealism of his later work. In Poster's view, the ideal speech situation is rooted in an extreme subjectivism, for it relies on

¹⁰⁶ Poster, M. (1981 : 465)

¹⁰⁷ Jensen, K.B. (1995 : 60-1) Jensen's employs the notion of "time-out" cultural practices to refer to those which place reality on an explicit agenda as an object of reflexivity, and which provide an occasion for contemplating oneself in a social, existential, or religious perspective. In the modern age, he contends, mass communication is the main ingredient of time-out culture which reflects upon the nature and representation of social reality. (1995 : 57)

an (unjustified) “ideally” truthful subject to eliminate distortions, which is extremely problematic. For, as Poster observes, the pressure to be truthful may actually lead to more elaborate lies and self-deceptions.¹⁰⁸

Moreover, while the Habermasian scheme argues that participants are bound only by the power of an argument, it does not account for the fact that the ability to argue is itself a power, one unequally distributed in society. Notwithstanding the fact that a significant and systematically unequal distribution of training and experience is necessary for free dialogue, such as theoretical and organizational skills, but, depending on race, sex, or class, individuals are socialized to take unequal roles in dialogue - to be passive or active, to act rationally or emotionally, to be aggressive or deferential, to conceive of themselves as experts or non-experts. And as Poster points out : “If speech is distorted systematically by social repression, then it is unlikely that open debate in the public sphere will eliminate that distortion”.¹⁰⁹

IV.

For Habermas, communication was a resolutely sober affair, based on a highly rationalized account of linguistic interchange, with conversation, reading and plain speech considered worthy forms of discourse for a democratic culture. As Peters argues, Habermas’s preferred mode of communication is the conversation of intimate equals in the lifeworld, as with the participatory character of literary culture in 18th century England, with the periodical articles of The Tatler, The Spectator and The Guardian being merely conversations by other means.¹¹⁰ Such literature, according to Habermas, was “. . .an immediate part of coffee-house

¹⁰⁸ Poster, M. (1981 : 466)

¹⁰⁹ Poster, M. (1981 : 466)

¹¹⁰ Peters, J.D. (1993 : 564)

discussions . . . The same discussion, transposed to another medium, was continued, only to reenter, via reading, the original medium of conversation".¹¹¹ Unfortunately, it is only on a small scale, in small speech communities, that such forms are feasible.¹¹² Habermas has quite simply not addressed the "natural" limits on the size of the public, nor the fact that at some point the number of participants in a conversation will mean that not everyone can be heard, and that some participants will become spectators.¹¹³

Habermas's later work on the mass media does display a certain degree of ambivalence, for while he argues that the mass media centralize message distribution networks, he also contends that they ". . . free communication processes from the provinciality of spatiotemporally restricted contexts and permit public spaces to emerge".¹¹⁴ Thus, after distinguishing between two kinds of media - on the one hand, "general media of exchange", such as money and power, which govern the system aspect of social life, and on the other hand, the "generalized forms of communication" found in the mass media per se - Habermas argues that the mass media are tied up with our "natural language", and are therefore open to retrieval by any agents for reassessment, retranslation, re-reception. The mass media, accordingly, do not replace but *condense* the dialogic processes of the lifeworld, since they rely on language, the essence of the lifeworld, for their work.¹¹⁵

However, despite this maturation of Habermas' position on the mass communication media, J.B.Thompson disputes the ability of Habermas's scheme to adequately deal with the new kind of publicness created by the

¹¹¹ Habermas, J. (1989a : 42)

¹¹² Aware of the natural limits to democracy, Plato calculated the optimal number of citizens in a democracy in his time - given the range of the foot and the power of the tongue - to be 5040, and argued that greater numbers would make democratic debate and discussion impossible. [Robert Dahl, Size and Democracy, Palo Alto, Stanford, 1973, cited Carey, (1992 : 3-4)]

¹¹³ Peters, J.D. (1993 : 564)

¹¹⁴ Habermas, J. (1987 : 390), cited Peters, J.D. (1993 : 561)

¹¹⁵ Habermas, J. (1987 : 390), cited Peters, J.D. (1993 : 561)

development of electronic communications media. For whereas Habermas valued the publicity generated by the dialogical exchanges among individuals who gathered together in the clubs and coffee-shops of early modern Europe, electronic means of communication have detached the phenomena of publicness from the sharing of a common locale. The public sphere, in other words, has become de-spatialized, and non-dialogical, and increasingly linked to a distinctive kind of visibility produced by, and achievable through the mass media. This is especially true of television, in which the reception of media products has become a form of private appropriation.

The ability to communicate to large, heteronomous and widely dispersed audiences is not, however, an exclusively modern phenomenon. In fact, as James Curran points out, "... a variety of signifying forms apart from face-to-face interaction - buildings, pictures, statues, coins, banners, stained glass, songs, medallions, rituals of all kinds - were deployed in pre-industrial societies to express sometimes highly complex ideas. At times, these signifying forms reached large audiences. For instance, the proportion of the adult population in Europe regularly attending mass during the central middle ages was almost certainly higher than the proportion of adults in contemporary Europe regularly reading a newspaper. And since the rituals of religious worship were laid down in set liturgies, the papal curia exercised a much more centralized control over the symbolic content mediated through public worship in the central middle ages than even the controllers of the highly concentrated and monopolistic press of contemporary Europe."¹¹⁶

It could well be due to Habermas's neglect of the representative forms of various mass communication practices prior to those of the electronic mass media that his general conception of communication remains so bound by face-to-face exchanges and so antagonistic to representative forms. Indeed, as Peters observes, Habermas is not only

¹¹⁶ Curran, J. (1992b : 202)

hostile to theatre, courtly forms, and ceremony, but also to the visual, and to rhetoric more generally.¹¹⁷ As a result, the "... brief flowering of the bourgeois public sphere is sandwiched, in the STPS's narrative, between two moments of 'representation': feudal pomp and modern public relations. 'Show' and manipulation always go together in STPS".¹¹⁸

A related aspect of Habermas's problematic conceptualization of the public sphere in terms of face-to-face conversation is that it bears the imprint of the classical Greek conception of public life, of assemblies and marketplaces. For Habermas, "communication" is "... an Appollian principle, one of unity, light, clarity, sunshine, reason", and he slights the "... Dionysian side of language, its dangers and irrationalities and its creative bursts."¹¹⁹ Such a view is problematic, according to Garnham, because it is unable to address the modes and functions of most mediated communication, which is nonrationalist and is concerned with psychological and imaginative satisfactions that have little to do overtly with politics.¹²⁰ In terms of the broadcast media, for instance, it would seem that Habermas's model would only acknowledge the news, current affairs, and documentary programs, and would neglect all forms of popular entertainment. This stance is reminiscent of his disavowal, in The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, of the importance of those less than wholly rational forms of public discourse such as carnivals, puppet shows and "penny horribles", and serves to obscure the fact that much of what

¹¹⁷ This is a serious flaw in Habermas's approach to public communications, for as Alvin Gouldner (1976 : 167) has pointed out, whereas until recently the fundamental symbolic means of ideology has been conceptual and linguistic (ie. printed matter), "... modern communication media have greatly intensified the nonlinguistic and iconic component ... of public communications."

Indeed, it could well be argued - as Michael Ryan (1988 : 570) does - that rhetorical forms have always been embedded within social discourse, from Plato and the Sophists down to Reagan and prime time TV. "All societies", Ryan contends, "... rely on ruses to maintain legitimacy, ritual to position subjects, and rhetoric to stabilize a communal representation and a world that assures the continuity of a shared phenomenal world. Images have always sustained and produced power, and it is doubtful there has ever been a genuine or authentic society".

¹¹⁸ Peters, J.D. (1993 : 562). Peters is obviously using STPS to refer to Habermas's The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere

¹¹⁹ Peters, J.D. (1993 : 563)

¹²⁰ Garnham, N. (1993 : 374)

we take as information and as an informative process of communication based on a rational model are anything but, having a high level of symbolic, mythical content and passive, entertainment value.¹²¹

Yet if we are to properly understand the role of the media in mediating the relation between the lifeworld and the system world, then the entertainment content of the media *must* be accorded its due.¹²² As Garnham maintains, this aspect of the media is the “primary tool we use” to handle the relation between lifeworld and system world. “It is on the basis of understandings drawn from those communicative experiences and of identities formed around them that we arrive at more overtly rational and political opinions and actions. The dynamics of this process and the relative weight within it of rationalized systems determinants and of the nonrationalized experiences of the lifeworld are a crucial and neglected area for media and cultural-studies research. If pursued, they may enable us to chart the limits of both politics and economics and at the same time to discover the media forms and structures most likely to foster the development of citizens, rather than mere consumers.”¹²³

While classical critical theory does provide some indispensable tools for analysing the ways in which the culture industries serve the interests of capitalism, it is for the most part denunciatory, and attacks the retrogressive ideological effects of the mass media. This is unfortunate, for such an indiscriminately dismissive attitude virtually precludes the possibility of uncovering the emancipatory and potentially subversive moments of resistance to the prevailing norms of popular culture. It is therefore unable to produce a multi-dimensional critical perspective that can analyse the full range of messages and cultural effects of the artifacts of popular culture.

¹²¹ Elliot, P. (1986 : 108)

¹²² I am reminded here of a line in Milan Kundera's Testaments Betrayed : “The story being told here is not serious, even though it is about the most dreadful things”.

¹²³ Garnham, N. (1993 : 374)

Ultimately, popular culture cannot magic away the evidence of social division and conflict, and as Douglas Kellner points out, its cultural forms and artifacts are never simple expressions of hegemonic ideology and ruling class interests. Rather, they are complex products that contain contradictory moments of desire, as well as displacement and repression; articulations of hopes and fears, dreams and nightmares; ideological celebrations of the status quo and utopian transcendence; and moments of rebellion and its attempted containment. In short, social conflicts enter into the works of popular entertainment, turning culture into a contested terrain rather than a field of one-dimensional manipulation and illusion. Any critical and cultural theory which fails to acknowledge this climate of stability and change, regularity and difference, and which treats the media and popular culture as manipulative instruments of social control, does so largely because it rests on an ahistorical conception of the culture industry¹²⁴. Consequently, it is unable to see the way in which the media reflect, express, and articulate social reality in a mediated fashion, and can thus deflate or undermine the ideological illusions of their own products and, however unwittingly, engage in social critique and ideological subversion. As Streeter puts it, the media are *both* massively powerful *and* fundamentally plural, and while on the one hand they are "massively structured and have engendered historically unprecedented levels of social regularity, coordination, and homogeneity", the media are also "... part and parcel of the 'long revolution', of the turbulent, ever-changing experience of modernity." As such, he continues, "... they are socially conflicted institutions and culturally complex artifacts that have played a part in introducing new complications of experience, knowledge and feeling into the lives of their massive and diverse audiences."¹²⁵

¹²⁴ The notion of the culture industry, like every theoretical conception, was a product of its historical period, and was profoundly shaped by the experience of fascism, as well as by the post-World War II Cold War situation when the media were enlisted in the anti-communist crusade and subject to strict control.

¹²⁵ Streeter, T. (1989 : 101)

In a social world in which first-hand acquaintance alone is no longer sufficient, mass communication media are means for imagining community, offering people panoramic surveys of the social horizon in varying ways, and enabling them to see each other seeing each other.¹²⁶ For through peoples' simultaneous engagement in "... the same excretory biological activities, from royal marriages to presidential funerals, the Olympic Games, World Cup football, superpower summits and large-scale disasters", a larger frame of reference is created within which identities are formed and personal values, lifestyles and world views created, as personal experiences combine with media experiences, and private lives connect to public activities.¹²⁷ Mediated events therefore greatly expand the range of possible experiences to which individuals are, in principle, exposed. With cultural experience no longer being restricted to the sharing of a common locale, the mobilization of meaning becomes increasingly capable of transcending the social context within which symbolic forms are produced. This obviously has implications for the nature, scope and political impact of ideological phenomena.

However, while the mass communication media may be accomplished in the representation of community, identity and values, they are generally

¹²⁶

Peters, J.D. (1993 : 566)

¹²⁷

Real, M., (1989 : 15)

The centrality of the mass media in structuring the life of Western, urbanized societies, and in representing the institutions in the political, economic, and cultural spheres of society as continuous points of reference for everyday routines, is described by Jensen (1995 : 68) as follows : "... listening to a (clock)radio when waking up is a way of linking up with the temporal structure of, and the latest events in, community and nation. Next, a newspaper read over breakfast is, among other things, a guide to planning leisure activities later in the day. As one goes to work, a walkman or a car radio may create a customized media environment which fills the gap between two well-defined contexts of home and work. In different work settings, media occur as continuous mood-setters canceling, in part, the reality of labour (music in offices or shops), as constitutive elements of an institution (economic news in the financial sector), or as cultural resources for a specific purpose (funnies during a lunch break, radio traffic reports for the journey home). Shopping malls, department stores, and supermarkets, visited on the way home, offer a carefully structured sequence of experiences of merchandise, music, advertising, announcements, and more merchandise to complement and orient the sequence of purchases. The electronic household, cinemas, arcades, and entertainment centres offer occasions to reconsider and transcend some of the previous routines."

anathemic towards participation. While a fantastic means of mediating reality and representing the social whole in the absence of “knowable communities”, the making of such public visions has become largely undemocratic, being left in the main to the experts or the commissars. And as Peters cautions, there is the danger that “. . . such representations may become monsters, a defining modern horror from Kafka to Baudrillard”¹²⁸.

From a democratic perspective, the public ought to enjoy a bigger role than simply ratifying a political world already represented (a depoliticized world in which all the critical choices have been made by experts), for the public are participants in the actual making of the world. However, as Carey critically observes, it is one thing to be told we are a species that actively creates the world, and another to be denied access to the machinery by which this miracle is pulled off.¹²⁹ What we must therefore ask ourselves is how we, as human beings and as members of communities, can consciously understand and direct the systems of influence and information that hold us together and express our collective solidarity. From the point of view of media and cultural analysis, the crucial question, as Nicholas Garnham understands it, is “. . . how much room for maneuver agents actually have within a symbolic system within which both the power to create symbols and access to the channels of their circulation is hierarchically structured and intimately integrated into a system of production and exchange, which is itself hierarchically structured”.¹³⁰

While the theory and practice of democracy have dealt with the necessity and problems of representation, clearly more thought needs to be given to the structures of representation that underpin the operation of the media of communication; to the ideological formations associated with the mediation of social relations across time and space; and to the (relatively autonomous) position of the active, interpreting, and meaning-creating

¹²⁸ Real, M. (1989 : 15)

¹²⁹ Carey, J. (1992 : 87)

¹³⁰ Garnham, N. (1993 : 373)

subject in relation to the symbolic order. The deployment of electronic means of communication therefore necessitates a recasting of the analysis of ideology within a new conceptual and theoretical framework - one better suited to understanding both how individuals, in the course of their everyday routines, receive, understand and incorporate media messages into their everyday lives, as well as the socio-historical conditions of this process. As J.B.Thompson elaborates, this requires that we focus attention on the contextual aspects of symbolic forms - the characteristics of the social contexts within which they are produced, transmitted and received; the institutional forms within which the technical means of transmission have been and are currently being deployed; and, more generally, the organization and reproduction of power and domination.¹³¹ Such considerations form the focus of the following chapters.

¹³¹ Thompson, J.B. (1990 : 145)

3.

“Moving beyond post-modernist despair”

It is commonplace these days to lament the corruptions of modern life, to see modern knowledge as increasingly shallow, modern culture as alienating and trivial, and to regard lived experience as increasingly unsatisfying. Given the ways in which privacy, intimacy and individuality are increasingly experienced as being under the external control of a banal and intrusive “sound-bite” electronic culture, this jeremiad is certainly not ungrounded.¹ Yet in addition to the confusing acceleration of the pace of life brought about by new technologies, and the bewildering mass of information and stimuli to which individuals are exposed, the character of modern public life is also widely construed as being predominantly defined by “reactionary” holders of power who share a widespread, self-consciously technocratic orientation.² Central to this orientation is the process of “technicization” - the result of increasing state intervention in everyday life and the growing interdependence of research and technology - which subsumes ethical questions under the banner of science, progress and

¹ As Douglas Coupland (1996 : 188) observes : “The increased number of outlets for media has had an effect of both trivializing fame and privacy for both the public and the famous. Never has the line between torpor and fascination been so thin.”

² This power arrangement, involving a tacit alliance between the capitalist hegemonic class and the political and administrative classes, is sustained by what Habermas (1970 : 111) refers to as “. . . a glassy background ideology which idolizes and fetishizes science”. By aiming to universalize the power of technical control, argues Keane (1988 : 219), this “technocratic consciousness” not only justifies the particular interests of a dominant social and political class, but “. . . jeopardizes the human capacity for publicly organizing and choosing political norms. Technocratic consciousness”, he continues, “. . . is the cunning and cynical enemy of democracy. It contains no utopian impulses. It suppresses consideration of the goals for which individuals, groups and whole systems could strive. And since technocratic consciousness is hostile to normative considerations, it outflanks and renders obsolete theoretical and practical strategies of challenging ideologies immanently”.

development and converts matters of moral value and political controversy into managerial, technical or planning processes.³

This situation has been exacerbated with the advent of new communication and information technologies, whose commercialization tendencies have enabled established powers to consolidate their conservative hegemony over popular modes of awareness through a vast number of manipulative pressures (not the least of which being the commodification and privatization of information resources). Furthermore, these new technologies have (arguably) greatly diminished the ability of individuals to understand and to be understood, and to live, think, feel, vote and comport themselves in a public sphere of politically responsible action and choice.⁴

As James Buchanan observes, the basic experience of the world for many of us is one of a disintegrating social situation and sense of self, and a belief that “. . . those groups and communities who seem to have the greatest continuity of experience, the most coherent and unified narratives, the most deeply felt feelings, and thus the greatest claim to connection between personal resonance and public order are too often among the most myopic and dangerous.”⁵

³ The “common sense” rationale for the production and marketing of new technologies is that of the “techno-futurist”, which holds that new technologies have a progressive ideal, and that they always benefit culture and society. This is neatly summed up in the Italian Futurist Filippo Marinetti's aphorism : “Progress is always right, even when it's wrong”. (cited Hayward,P. 1993 : 3) The assumed inevitability of technological progress seems to remove it from the moral spectrum, as is evident from the setting aside of a mere 3 - 5 % of the Human Genome Project's total budget (conservatively estimated at \$ 3 billion) for studies of the social, ethical and legal implications of genetic research. (Jamison,R.R., 1997 : 49)

⁴ Foucault's delibidinized vision of agency alludes to this impoverishment of human experience. As Richters (1988 : 630) observes, Foucault described the body as a sort of “passive vector on which discourses operate” - simply the prey of normalizing and individuating forces - such that the Foucaultian subject is taken to be incapable of constructing resistances or mobilizing resources. In fact, not only did Foucault see no hope of restoring or creating the centred, unalienated subject, collective or individual, but he was also critical of any intersubjective alternative. “Man”, he wrote, “. . . would be erased, like a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea”. (1973 : 387)

⁵ Buchanan, J. (1995 : 166)

It is noteworthy that even Francis Fukuyama's "end of history" thesis - which celebrates liberal democracy as the inescapable framework within which individual and collective projects must be pursued - is not one of whole-hearted bourgeois triumphalism. For while Fukuyama argues that there is no systemic alternative (to liberal democracy), he also offers an ambivalent appraisal of the prospects for humankind, and a less than total enthusiasm for the capitalist eternity he predicts. "The end of history", he writes, "will be a very sad time. The struggle for recognition, the willingness to risk one's life for a purely abstract goal, the worldwide ideological struggle that called forth daring, courage, imagination and idealism, will be replaced by economic calculation, the endless solving of technical problems, environmental concerns, and the satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands. In the post-historical period there will be neither art nor philosophy, just the perpetual caretaking of the museum of the human spirit".⁶

The mass media are generally seen as being deeply implicated in this state of affairs, with their seductive allure serving to extend the corrosive characteristics of modernity's confines, cutting us off from the possibilities of the past and blocking the promise of the future. Steered by the "voracious appetite" of an increasingly global, transnational, post-Fordist capitalism, which seeks to turn every aspect of culture into an occasion for capital accumulation, the volume and reach of the mass media has certainly ballooned over the last few decades.

The proliferation in television-viewing practices, for example, extends from transnational 24-hour satellite channels (such as CNN and MTV) to a myriad of local or regional cable channels dishing up unmanageable volumes of specialized programming; from video recorders and remote control devices (which encourage "zipping" and "zapping") to TV's watched in "uncommon" places (banks, laundries, campsites, airports, and so on).

⁶ Fukuyama, F. (1989 : 18)

Indeed, in Ien Ang's opinion, television has become so ubiquitous that it practically "bleeds" into every corner of day-to-day social life, making for "... an endless, unruly and uncontrollable play of differences in social practices related to television viewing : continuous social differentiation bordering on chaos".⁷

Similarly, Frederick Jameson has remarked that the deluge of images, symbols and commodified media products has made it increasingly difficult to discern meaning and purpose in what he describes as the "depthless cultural logic of late capitalism". As he observes, "... no society has ever been quite so mystified in quite so many ways as our own, saturated as it is with messages and information"⁸.

Indeed, in Danilo Zolo's view, the mass media have come to play a surrogate role for experience itself, producing what he calls "... a sort of dematerialization of life and a 'spectacular' stylization of social relations". For while there certainly remain many traditional centres of social interaction and information-sharing, such as universities, trade unions, voluntary associations, churches and temples, it would seem that for the most part, individuals are incapable of relating "reality" to something which is not an experience "mediated" to them by the means of mass communication.⁹ For as the primary "frames" of direct experience, the mass media are able to exclude as "non-real" anything extraneous to their own view of reality. In doing so, they create a social environment which appears increasingly abstract, contingent and "plastic" - which appears, in Zolo's words, as "... the highly-changeable result of the interaction between selective representations of a 'reality' over which individuals no longer feel they have control."¹⁰

⁷ Ang, I. (1996 : 174)

⁸ Jameson, F. (1981 : 60-61)

⁹ The media fascination with the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, the massive outpouring of her "fans" grief, and her subsequent (illusory) individualization illustrates the tremendous power of this almost surreal "filtering" of reality.

¹⁰ Zolo, D. (1992 : 13-14) Zolo's description of the media-dominated social environment brings to mind Foucault's (1972 : 6-7) critique of homocentrism. Here

Thus, on the one hand, there is an urgent need to think critically and creatively about communications media and their extraordinary social and cultural implications, and to start to shape the electronic environment in socially productive ways. Yet, on the other hand, it has become increasingly difficult to conceive of this environment as an easily researchable, contained and containable reality. This situation has evidently been exacerbated by the "communications revolution" of the so-called "post-industrial" or "information age", in which the rapid development of advanced electronic and information technologies has dramatically increased the role of images in all aspects of contemporary life. Closely associated with "post-traditional" telecommunication technologies such as videotext, computerized communication technologies, telematics, satellites and scores of other technological auxiliaries often combined under the rubric "informatics", this new "information age" implies complex communication and information networks and interrelationships, an immense and unprecedented spread of technology, rapid systems innovation and a dramatic increase in the speed and quantity at which messages travel. Indeed, for Paul Virilio, we now live in a "dromocracy", and are increasingly dominated by speed in the transmission of objects and symbols.¹¹

Thus while communication has become the central process in global, national and local social organizations, it would appear that long-term, deep structural forces and the dynamics of power relations have enabled powerful decision-making groups to exploit new information technologies to consolidate and extend their positions. Despite the fact that new technologies raise different questions than do the mass media - their chief

I am referring to his use of the notion of discontinuity as a working principle in the historical process, the erosion of the "sovereignty of man", and the eclipse of the Cartesian-Kantian legacy of subjectivity. Foucault's argument is that we can no longer treat "man" as the finite subject of history (or social processes), nor grasp history through a collection of "documents" disclosing human purposes and meanings. Instead of seeking to transform the *monuments* of the past into *documents* from which one might "read off" the traces of human speech or action, Foucault contends that all we can now aspire to is the intrinsic description of the monument.

¹¹ Virilio, P. cited Zolo, D. (1992 : 13)

characteristics being the provision of diverse material on demand to individuals, and allowing for the fragmentation of the mass audience and even for silent individualized communication - many observers still see the new "de-massified" technologies as being complicitous in creating new dependancies and widening social discrepancies. Thus, Joe Weizenbaum, Professor of Computer Science at M.I.T., when speaking of telecommunications and information technologies, asked of Daniel Bell (and us) : "This magnificent technology, more than Wagnerian in its proportions . . . what does it deliver to the masses ? An occasional gem buried in immense avalanches of the ordure of everything that is most banal and insipid or pathological in our civilization".¹²

Even a casual glance at what passes for public debate within the "postmodern" media climate seems to confirm this view that communications media work to further mystify social relations and reinforce uncritical consensual political values. It comes as no surprise, then, that many erstwhile left political theorists take it as axiomatic that an informed public sphere has completely broken down. In the (post) modern public sphere, the argument goes, we can no longer assume the rationality and intelligibility of media output, nor presume an equal degree of communicative competence to exist among the citizenry.¹³

¹² Elliott, P. (1986 : 111) Weizenbaum may well have been referring to the Internet, which, as Hamid Mowlana (1997 : 105) observes, is a mixed blessing. For while the Internet "... allows the computer-savvy individual to bypass the chokehold that the global media giants have on political discourse, it also enables them to disseminate underground materials advocating actions like the Oklahoma City terrorist bombing." The potential of new technologies for fomenting such social pathologies is evident from the tremendous growth of so-called "hate sites" on the World Wide Web. According to Marc Knobel, of the Simon Wiesenthal Centre in Los Angeles, there are at present about 600 such sites, of which he has catalogued 300, counting 87 neo-Nazi sites, 35 white supremacist and 51 espousing terrorism. (See Mail and Guardian, Nov.28 - Dec.4, 1997 : 42)

¹³ It is, of course, a moot point whether "an equal degree of communicative competence" could ever have been presumed. The despairing condemnation of the contemporary (or "postmodern") public sphere seems to be based on the illusory notion that such a condition did once exist.

Moreover, besides the unequal distribution of the cognitive and linguistic prerequisites for meaningful participation in the democratic process of will formation, the social conditions of consumption are assumed to be such that we can no longer even assume the existence of any organic community of shared concerns and meanings necessary to make collective sense of media output, to work out common political goals, and to develop consolidated voices of opinion. As Philip Elliott laments, far from being involved as citizens contesting politically expressed demands based on knowledge, information and association within nation states, people participate only as members of the market, as consumption units in a corporate world founded on acceptable levels of comfort, pleasure and control.¹⁴

Instead of providing an informed public with the symbolic and practical resources to achieve an integrated sense of meaning and purpose, the factual social and cultural world is seen as increasingly disintegrating into organized distinct publics (the audience as commodity), segmented both vertically (information rich and information poor) and horizontally (into narrow subcultures and discursive ghettos). It is in the context of this further "destructuring" of the public sphere, and the isolation and dispersion of political agents, that Zolo warns of a "democratic melancholy" which weaves together apathy, greed and consumeristic frustration.¹⁵ For not only do modern political systems suffer from the absence of a political thought or the ability to govern which matches the same levels of broadness, complexity and interdependence evident in the problems which have to be faced¹⁶ but, as Zolo continues, the "non-

¹⁴ Elliott, P. (1986 : 106). It ought to be noted that this account would surely hold differently (if at all) for the less developed world, where the goal of economic progress is considered a priority over that of consolidating democratic citizenship. In the post-apartheid South African context, for instance, democracy appears to be more about generating consent for the implementation of economic reforms (seen as a technological necessity) than about defining real choices for a given political community. [See Comrades in Business : Post-Liberation Politics in South Africa, by Heribert Adams, Kogila Moodley, and Frederik van Zyl Slabbert, (Tafelberg, Cape Town, 1997)

¹⁵ Zolo, D. (1992 : 178)

¹⁶ Zolo, D. (1992 : 178)

decisional" process of "consumeristic and multimedia homologization of citizen-consumers" entails a threat to individual autonomy at its deepest level, impinging as it does on the cognitive and emotive formation of preferences and political will.¹⁷

This appreciation of the complex cognitive situation in which individuals find themselves, and the growing sense that the world is today in a state of malaise, if not "out of control", speaks to what Raymond Williams has called the "postmodern structure of feeling".¹⁸ This "feeling" or "attitude" refers to both the sense, or recognition, of the political and epistemological limits of the principles of universal reason, rationality and truth; and to the loss of faith in the possibility of a world singularly organized around such principles.

While some postmodern positions may sound somewhat defeatist, as James Buchanan observes, their expression of the problems of our technological world is the most adequate to their radicality, with such thinkers probably best articulating what Heidegger called the mood or tone (*Stimmung*) of contemporary life.¹⁹ Certainly, their description of our age as one of "... fragmented and fractured narratives of the self in which participation in community is replaced by the representation of participation within imagined communities"²⁰ seems quite appropriate to the nature and effects of today's media environment.²¹ Indeed, the more radical

¹⁷ Zolo, D. (1992 : 188)

¹⁸ Williams, R. (1977)

¹⁹ Buchanan, J. (1996), This quote is taken from p.13 of an unpublished version.

²⁰ Buchanan, J. (1994 : 57).

²¹ Douglas Coupland (1996 : 180) writes of the "denarration" of the human being, referring to this process as the "... inevitable end-product of information over-saturation". According to Coupland, so essential is it that our lives be stories (narratives), that when these stories vanish, "... we feel lost, dangerous, out of control and susceptible to the forces of randomness". Thus, whereas until about ten years ago such cultural components as religion, family, ideology, class strata, geography, politics and a sense of living within a historical continuum provided the "stencils" within which we could trace our lives and forge our identities, Coupland maintains that the sudden deluge of electronic and information media into our lives has caused these "stencils" to disappear, almost overnight, leaving us with little idea of what "life" is supposed to be.

postmodern positions go so far as to argue that we are now living in “. . . a world of persuasive unreality, a world where perceptions are increasingly shaped by mass media-imagery, political rhetoric and techniques of wholesale disinformation that substitute for any kind of reasoned public debate”.²²

Thus, as Douglas Kellner observes, Jean Baudrillard envisages a “new stage of history” and type of society in which all boundaries, distinction, categories, and values of previous forms are obliterated in a black hole of signs and information which absorbs all content into cybernetic noise.²³ For Baudrillard, ours is a world made “unclear” by the elimination of representation, such that “. . . neither in politics nor in culture is there more than a whirlpool of effects, lightening flashes, special effects, and sudden polarizations”.²⁴ Within this fashion-like world in which “fads express nothing”, the electronic media are seen as instruments of “cold seduction” which have nothing to do with the construction of meaning or the deciphering of truth.

Similarly, Sorkin argues that, being deprived of substantial differences and meaning, the TV world “. . . touches the fullness of the surrealist ambition, that total suspension of the ‘critical intellect’.” Television, she continues, renders itself a purely aesthetic medium, whose “. . . narcoleptic joys suffuse the stymied brain, which is left with no recourse other than to sway to its intoxicating rhythms”.²⁵ According to this brand of postmodernism, then, the function of the television and the mass media is to “. . . prevent response, to isolate and privatize individuals, and to trap them in a universe of simulcra where it is impossible to distinguish between

²² Norris, C. (1990 : 171)

²³ Kellner, D. (1989 : 134)

²⁴ Baudrillard, J. “L’ Euphorie sous Perfusion”, in Le Monde, Nov.15, (1985), cited van Rossum, W. (1986 : 185)

²⁵ Sorkin, quoted Best, S. & Kellner, D. (1987 : 111)

the spectacle and the real, and where individuals come to prefer spectacle over 'reality'. . . ."²⁶

Increasingly beleaguered by this sense that history has entered a phase of ". . . absurd self-parody which can only be captured by some wildly exorbitant means of representation"²⁷, Left political thought is rapidly jettisoning the idea of comprehending history in rational, purposive or humanly intelligible terms, and is increasingly eschewing the possibility of developing effective counter-strategies to the cultural and ideological hegemony of the "authoritarian populism"²⁸ so successfully championed by the governments of Reagan and Thatcher.²⁹ As Christopher Norris observes, such theorists seem to be retreating from what they perceive to be an increasingly outworn Enlightenment paradigm of reason, critique, truth, values and genuine needs, preferring instead the theoretical refuge of all manner of fashionable "pseudo-radical rhetorics and postures by which to disguise their own deep sense of political failure or defeat".³⁰

Through stimulating discussions on the constitutive role played by the media in the production of social life, postmodernism has given critical

²⁶ Kellner, D. (1989 : 137)

²⁷ Norris, C. (1990 : 36)

²⁸ Term coined by Stuart Hall, in "Popular Democratic versus Authoritarian Populism", in Hunt, A. (ed). Marxism and Democracy, (London : Lawrence & Wishart, 1980)

²⁹ This historical point is reinforced by the "modernization" of the British "New Labour" Party. As party leader Tony Blair declared at Labour's annual party conference in Brighton, the party's distinctly right-wing economic policies demonstrate that it has changed, that it is now more firmly rooted in Government than in opposition, and that it will not revert to Left-wing policies while in power. (As reported in the Weekly Telegraph, Issue No.324, 8-14 October, p.8).

The confidence-inspiring but ideological neutral "mood politics" of Blair's New Labour (and Lionel Jospin's Socialist Party in France) are a reflection of the substantial intellectual current on the Left, which is based on the notion that contemporary "post-modern" society is characterized by the diversification of social relations and experiences, a plurality of life styles and a multiplication of personal identities. Such a theoretical strategy, according to Ellen Meiksins Wood (1995 : 260), effectively conceptualizes away the totalizing unity of the capitalist system and dissolves its social relations into an unstructured and fragmented plurality of identities and differences. Questions about historical causality and political efficacy are thereby evaded, and the starting point of any truly emancipatory politics - that is, class analysis - disappears from view.

³⁰ Norris, C. (1990 : 1)

theorists much food for thought. However, to the degree that they are offered, the answers extended by the rhetorics and postures of the various strands of postmodern cultural pessimism are generally inadequate. Indeed, it could well be argued that their apolitical and cynical projection of advanced capitalist society as a model whose fixed determinations propel the collectivity towards a slow but painless spiritual death indicates nothing less than a lack of imaginative will and radical political energy to work for alternatives.³¹

Certainly, the failure of postmodernist discourse to differentiate between phenomena and practices that occur within modern society, and the "levelling" of distinctions consequent on their totalizing perspective (which either contends that power and surveillance are ubiquitous or all-too-readily succumbs to the notion of a totally reified and administered world), achieves very little by way of meaningful social analysis. For far from undermining the repression and oppression they seek to eliminate, by calling into question the very distinctions that make critique possible, postmodernists actually undermine the conceptual apparatus that provides insight into the human situation.

As Habermas presents it, if "... enlightenment and manipulation, the conscious and the unconscious, forces of production and forces of destruction, expressive self-realization and repressive desublimation, effects that ensure freedom and those that remove it, truth and ideology" are confused and homogenized, then critique will no longer be able to "... discern contrasts, shadings, and ambivalent tones within the flat and faded landscape of a totally administered, calculated, and power-laden world".³²

³¹ van Rossum (1986 : 186) contends that far from being concerned with Enlightenment, or with a critical theory of representation, Baudrillard's real message is the shoulder-shrugging grin of "The Die is Cast". Baudrillard, in other words, sells us the "delights of indifference", and the elaborated nonchalance within his writing seems to ask "How can we still grin at the repugnant?", to which his answer is "By avoiding critique".

³² Habermas, J. (1987b : 338),

This view is echoed by Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, who argue that cumulatively, postmodernism signifies the “death of hermeneutics”. As they put it, the argument that “. . . there is nothing behind the surface of texts, no depth or multiplicity of meaning for critical inquiry to discover and explicate” involves nothing less than extending reification to ‘critique’ itself “. . . by reducing cultural criticism to description of surface and form cut off from social criticism and radical politics” .³³ Stripped thereby not only of the possibility of theoretically analysing “reality”, but also of any notion of a self-conscious objectified self - and thereby all notions of ethical subjectivity - the aesthetic realm (and textual strategies) into which postmodern discourse escapes seems to preclude from the start a self-conscious praxis that can assist in overcoming the problems it has intuitively recognised.³⁴

I .

This study takes issue with the intellectual drift toward the “postmodern-pragmatist” view and, like Christopher Norris, considers its disbelief in the possibility of constructing an effective counter-hegemonic argument on valid theoretical grounds to be “. . . a species of disguised apologetics for the socio-political status quo.”³⁵ Central to this study’s argument, then, is a refusal to acquiesce to liberal free market ideology, consumer politics, or to the “end of ideology” thesis, much less the putative inexorability of the “textualization” of reality (which holds that a procession of endless simulated images and media illusions cuts the ground out from

³³ Best, S. & Kellner, D. (1987 : 100, 105)
The authors also contend that the anti-hermeneutic position “. . . ignores the argument that our very mode of being is interpretative, and that interpretation is needed precisely because things for the most part are *not* given and so must be interpreted, with all the hermeneutic equipment that we can muster”.

³⁴ Habermas, J. (1987b : 337)

³⁵ Norris, C. (1990 : 3-4)

any attempt at recycling the concepts and categories of Marxist *Ideologiekritik*).

Rather, this study's critical political and cultural engagement is with the discursive conflicts of "everyday life", and it is sustained by an enlightened or emancipated interest which aims to disclose the sources of mystification, power and domination in the social production and consumption of meaning. In doing so it seeks to highlight the mutability of the status quo, its rapacious underpinnings, and the possibility of positively deploying what Andrew Wernick calls a "transcapitalist discourse and symbology" to break the "circle of the commodity-form's normative self-regulation."³⁶

In contrast to the paradigmatic "critical" model of the media - as exemplified by the Frankfurt School, many Althusserians, and the latest proponents, the post-structuralists - which (to differing degrees) identifies the media as being an all-powerful and autonomous social force, and purely an instrument of domination, manipulation and social control in which radical intervention and radical media and cultural politics are impossible, this study's hermeneutic exploration treats the mass media and popular culture as a contested terrain where fundamental conflicts and struggles within society are played out. Televisual texts, for instance, are not seen as a bastion of one-dimensionality and hegemony, but rather as containing polysemic, multivalent meanings whose depth, utopian moments and explicitly ideological problematics are a potential breeding ground for oppositional ideals and alternatives to the injustices and impoverishment of everyday life under consumer capitalism.

The concern is thus ideology critique, and at a deeper level, the way in which symbolic forms function in relation to power and domination. As

³⁶ Wernick, A. (1984 : 28)

“systems of interacting symbols” or “patterns of interworking meanings”³⁷, ideologies are situated at a site of struggle between competing definitions of reality which, despite being highly dependent on the balance of forces at a particular historical juncture, is nevertheless always an open terrain of contestation. This open-ended nature of processes of signification - in which the encoding and decoding of messages determine a multiplicity of referential connections to social reality - is a crucial theoretical opening for ideological critique. It suggests, firstly, that there are analytically distinct “moments” at which meanings become ideological - that is, function to sustain the bases, grounds and modes of power and domination. And second, it suggests that such “moments” can be strategically exploited to produce an alternative (transcapitalist) interworking of this configuration of dissimilar meanings and, by extension, an alternative expressive power and rhetorical force for the final symbolic forms.

The argument of this study is that theoretical positions which conclude with the social world's ideological self-closure have failed to account for both the inherent “polysemy” of cultural/media texts, and for the continued existence of divergent and resistance subcultures. Given that different material socio-cultural positions will entail different discursive practices and ideological frames being used in the reception and decoding of such “open” media texts, the suggestion that the dominant culture has an irresistible hegemonic force cannot be legitimately sustained.³⁸

This chapter therefore maintains that our understanding of the ideological nature and functioning of the mass media will be furthered by exploring the relatively autonomous logic of symbolic communication in what Habermas has called the “lifeworld”. This requires a theoretical shift away

³⁷ Geertz, C. (1973 : 207)

³⁸ Advertisements for Coca-Cola and designer jeans, for instance, can have radically different meanings for different audiences. While for many they would serve as a stimulus to buy, in poor, impoverished communities they may well have revolutionary implications, breeding resentment for prevailing socio-economic conditions and fostering aspirations for a “better life”.

from the traditional Marxist base / superstructure formulation, and an attempt to register the specificity and relative autonomy of discursive practices and signifying systems. Within this "culturalist" perspective, Gramsci's theory of hegemony and Althusser's reformulations are pertinent, initiating as they do a decisive break with ideological determinism of an economistic and reflective nature. In addition, the conceptual tools and theoretical insights of formal semiological and structuralist studies in the fields of linguistics, art and anthropology (by Ferdinand Saussure, Roland Barthes and Claude Levi-Strauss, for example) will be appropriated to further our understanding of what ideology is - or, at least, how it works. Such studies are principally concerned with immanent analysis, and with moving from content to structure or from manifest meaning to the level of code.

To the extent that media texts can be explored semiologically - as a *discourse* - it becomes apparent that "... presentations do not have a single fixed meaning but are capable of signifying different values and presenting different codes of behaviour depending on how they are articulated as signs amongst other signifying elements within a discourse".³⁹ Provided the thesis is not pushed too far in a structuralist direction - that is to say, provided a sufficient account is given of the subjective dimensions of power and the individual's constitutive role in the production of social reality - semiology provides a fruitful way of reconceptualizing ideologies : not as concepts, false ideas or arguments which do not comprehend actual conditions, but as "... sets of rules which determine the organization and the functioning of images and concepts"⁴⁰. Ideology, so conceived, is therefore more a system of coding reality than a determined set of coded messages, and emerges as relatively autonomous in relation to agents' intentions and consciousness of the rules and categories which make possible certain points of view.

³⁹ Woollacott, J. (1992 : 94)

⁴⁰ Veron, (1971), quoted in Hall, S. (1992 : 71)

Indeed, in Stuart Hall's opinion, *provided the conceptions and structures of the ideological matrix are radically historicized*⁴¹, there are sufficient theoretical homologies to permit the assimilation of Levi-Strauss's proposition - that ". . . speakers produce meaning, but only on the basis of conditions which are not of the speaker's making, and which pass through him / her into language, unconsciously" - to the more classic Marxist proposition that ". . . people make history, but only in determinate conditions which are not of their making, and which pass behind their backs".⁴²

The argument of this thesis is premised on the relative autonomy (and participation) of the audience in the interpretation of "open" media texts. However, it also cautions against overexaggerating both the strength of the audience's "semiotic power", and the degree of "polysemy" exhibited by such texts. That is to say, it would be theoretically naive to (a) simply oppose the Sender's sphere (production and distribution) with the Receiver's sphere (reception and consumption); and (b) to isolate the media and their audiences from the broader contexts within which both are shaped. Any strategy which simply equates evidence of diversity in readings of media texts with audience freedom and independence from media power, and which "brackets" the larger social and historical contexts, will offer little assistance to the formidable task of unveiling contemporary structures of domination.

⁴¹ Hall's qualification alludes to the need for an account of the whole social formation which incorporates the totalizing, homogenizing drive of capitalism. We cannot simply take the cultural product (text) as a privileged object for analysis, for this would work to obscure all those processes that produce the product with its particular form and content for a particular consumer. As Wood (1995 : 262-3) observes, capitalism is a "ruthless totalizing process" which ". . . subjects all social life to the abstract requirements of the market, through the commodification of life in all its aspects, determining the allocation of labour, leisure, resources, patterns of production, consumption and the disposition of time. This makes a mockery of all our aspirations to autonomy, freedom of choice, and democratic self-government".

⁴² Hall, S. (1992 : 72)

First, with respect to the way in which the communication process works, it must be acknowledged that the inherent ideological struggle is not a "two-way force" in which the partners can be implicitly considered separate but equal. Such a linear and transparent model of the communication process is epistemologically flawed, based as it is on hierarchical notions of status and expertise. Neither the notion of rational manipulation from above nor that of the autonomy of an "active audience" below can be seriously entertained.

As far as the idea of rational manipulation is concerned, this involves relegating audiences to the "plebian receiving end" of a highly visible and public mass communication process. As Ien Ang argues, this amounts to nothing short of reifying, as invisible, the silent majorities of the suburban wasteland.⁴³ The image of the "passive audience", is shared by both the positivistic and functionalist approach and by neo-Marxist critical theory, both of which, according to Ang, are overly concerned with the "myth of cultural integration" and are therefore unable to conceive of the relative autonomy of the "receiving end" outside and beyond the mass communicational order.

Yet it would be equally misleading to exaggerate the power of this audience in constructing its own meanings and making its own choices. Indeed, as Ang suggests, to reject the increasing commercialization and commodification of the cultural and media industries, and to advocate an "active audience" capable of exploiting television as the site of a populist "cultural democracy" would be tantamount to supporting the self-congratulatory liberal image of consumer freedom and sovereignty.⁴⁴ Conceptions of the audience cannot be abstracted from the broader context of cultural and social theorizing. The "audience" is not something "out there". As Ang points out, it ". . . has to be defined first and foremost

⁴³ Ang, I. (1996 : 7)

⁴⁴ Ang, I. (1996 : 9)

as a discursive trope signifying the constantly shifting and radically heterogeneous ways in which meaning is constructed and contested in multiple everyday contexts of media use and consumption".⁴⁵

In short, the social production and reproduction of sense and meaning involved in any cultural process is not simply a matter of signification. It is crucially also a matter of *power*, which cannot simply be "shepherded" out of the communicative process as an "extraneous factor". Indeed, any consideration of the media-audience interface *demands* an analysis of the relation of power and meaning in multidimensional and dynamic terms. As Ang maintains, it is imperative that we recognize the operation of multiple forms of power at different points in the system of social networks in which both the media and audiences are complexly located and produce meanings.⁴⁶ Quite simply, if Foucault has taught us anything, it is that power is not a fixed entity which simply changes hands or progresses from one area to another in a linear fashion.⁴⁷ As Wapner observes, power, is web-like, and ". . . one cannot identify its sources nor control its direction and ultimate impact anymore that one can find the beginning and end of a spider web and draw a straight line between them".⁴⁸ In the contemporary world, then, power should not be comprehended in terms of agents or origins (such as seeing the mode of production as an independent variable and responsible for all aspects of human life). Rather, the study of power should proceed through an examination of the micro-formations of power, exploring what Foucault called its ". . . capillary forms of existence, the

⁴⁵ Ang, I. (1996 : 4)

⁴⁶ Ang, I. (1996 : 169)

⁴⁷ As Umberto Eco (1987 : 240) observes, the Foucaultian understanding of power is not of a one-way process between an entity that commands and its subjects. Power, that is, is not "one", but as it infiltrates a place where it is not felt at first, it is demonically "plural"; "legion". In Foucault's own words : ". . . this power is exercised rather than possessed ; it is not the 'privilege', acquired or preserved, of the dominant class, but the overall effect of its strategic positions - an effect that is manifested and sometimes extended by the position of those who are dominated. Furthermore, this power is not exercised simply as an obligation or a prohibition on those who 'do not have it' ; it invests them, is transmitted by them and through them ; it exerts pressure upon them, just as they themselves, in their struggles against it, resist the grip it has on them". (1979 : 16-17)

⁴⁸ Wapner, P. (1989 : 101)

point where power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives".⁴⁹

This concern with questions of power in relation to the communicative process in general ties in with the second point made above - this being the need to situate the institutions of the mass media environment in terms of their intimate interweavings with other social and political entities. This follows Hall's earlier injunction to "radically historicize" the social processes and conditions of media signification. For while we must take seriously semiological approaches to media texts, and accord signifying processes a certain degree of specificity and autonomy, we cannot ignore the social, political and economic conditions under which meaning production and consumption take place. We need, in other words, to analyse the mass media in terms of their complex *dual* nature. As Carl Gardner and Julie Sheppard correctly observe, any medium of mass communication is both ". . . a system of representation, producing meanings with a certain autonomy which are necessarily multivalent and unpredictable", *and* at the same time ". . . an economic and industrial system, a means of production, increasingly turning out standardised commodities".⁵⁰

Moreover, the wider socioeconomic structure is also highly determinate of the interpretative framework used to extract meanings, and one's pre-existing social identity is a particularly crucial determining factor in this regard. As Nicholas Garnham writes, ". . . one's readiness to accept or reject, to take seriously or otherwise any given media representation depends upon the specific 'taste public' with which you have been socialized. It may also depend on your possession of more general, but also socially differentiated, interpretative skills, most obviously literacy. The

⁴⁹ Foucault, M. (1980 : 39)

⁵⁰ Gardner, C. & Sheppard, J. (1984 : 26-38)

ways in which the resulting meanings are translated into social action will then also be determined both materially by the range of institutionalized practices made available by a given social structure and hermeneutically by the range of legitimized practices available.”⁵¹

Thus, recognizing that factors other than the textual play a part in media interpretation, this study will seek to come to terms with the historical and institutional framework for the contemporary structure of communicative practices. This will involve addressing issues of political economy - especially the analysis of the commodity form - so as to gain a sense of how larger social forces impinge on everyday life and also to analyse existing configurations of power and domination. For without exploring the capitalist logic by which concrete cultural forms and practices emerge - without, for instance, exploring the economic determinants of media and communications structures and products - we shall be unable to fully grasp the “totality”, the whole social formation within which the media are embedded. The result would be a theoretically impoverished understanding of the ideological forms and practices within the contemporary media environment, and thus of the constitution, dynamics and development of the socio-historical world.

⁵¹ Garnham, N. (1990 : 15)

4.

“Moving beyond Marxist theories of ideology”

Applying the brush with broad strokes, the concept “ideology” has two general connations. It is either seen as a neutral or relative set of beliefs about the sociopolitical world, corresponding to a perceived increase in rationality (as within the tradition of liberal theory, for instance, which values the possibility of rational discourse and the ability of the ‘rational man’ to find the truth via ‘reasoned discourse’); or alternatively, “ideology” is seen in a negative light, insofar as it is taken to stand in opposition to the “objective” truth about societal reality. The latter, broadly speaking, is the orthodox Marxist position, which identifies ideology as distortion, bias, cover-up or simply false ideas screened by superficial appearances.¹ This pejorative understanding of ideology is not, however, limited to Marxist schools of thought, for, as Clifford Geertz observes, the concept of ideology now regnant in the social sciences is a thoroughly evaluative one.²

Following Werner Stark, the concept of ideology is a loaded one, and its study “. . . deals with a mode of thinking which is thrown off its proper course”. Ideological thought, he continues, is “. . . something shady, something that ought to be overcome and banished from our mind”.³ Alvin Gouldner makes a similar point when he observes how in both the language of everyday life and of sociology (be it academic sociology or Marxist), ideology has been stigmatized as a pathological object, as

¹ As Gouldner (1975 : 9) notes, the underlying, latent paradigm behind the Marxist category of ‘ideology’ is “. . . a belief system that makes pretentious and unjustified claims to scientificity”. For Marx, he continues, science and ideology were inextricably linked, with the latter being “failed science, not authentic science”.

² Geertz, C. (1973 : 196)

³ Stark, W. The Sociology of Knowledge, (1958 : 48), quoted in Geertz, C. (1973 : 196)

"irrational cognition ; as defective discourse".⁴ This view, however, is problematized by its unreflective nature, for as Gouldner continues, "It glimpses, but never really grasps, the way it *itself* is ideologized because of its own structural situation".⁵ The claims of social science thus deserve to be scrutinized closely, for their own "disinterestedness" is scarcely above suspicion.

Leaving aside for a moment the nature of the connection between ideology and "reality" (or "truth"), the point must be made that ideological thought springs from social-psychological sources, and serves several social and psychological functions. Whether one construes ideology as a symptom of (or remedy for) societal disequilibrium or individual dislocation, allowing individuals to flee anxiety, or as a mask (or weapon) in a Machiavellian struggle for advantage and power, ideology is ultimately about the construction of meaning. That is to say, ideology is fundamentally about the shaping of order out of chaos and the construction of a vision of public purpose anchored in a compelling image of "social reality". As such, it comes to dictate the terms of access to conflictual social and economic realities, and provides the symbolic resources with which individuals can formulate, think about, and react to political problems. In Clifford Geertz's words, ideology is instrumental in ". . . defining (or obscuring) social categories, stabilizing (or upsetting) social expectations, maintaining (or undermining) social norms, strengthening (or weakening) social consensus, relieving (or exacerbating) social tensions".⁶

Ideology, however, is not neutral. While it is true that ideology basically emerges from the largely unconscious social processes underlying the way people talk to each other, name things, make assertions and to a degree understand their social and economic relations and their

⁴ Gouldner, A. (1976 : 3) This understanding of ideology, Gouldner continues, was one reason (not the most important, but *one*) why some scholars prematurely celebrated the "End of Ideology".

⁵ Gouldner, A. (1976 : 4)

⁶ Geertz, C. (1973 : 203)

technological situation, it nevertheless serves to mediate and reproduce the existing relations of social power. Ideology, as Thompson maintains, is “meaning in the service of power”.⁷ Thus, in Marx’s and Engels’ classic formulation, ideological forms are the “false consciousness” of a given society : “. . . the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas”, providing the *intellectual* force for the perpetuation of the ruling *material* force in society.⁸

J.B.Thompson identifies three modes by which ideology operates : first, *legitimation*, whereby structures of domination are accorded moral authority ; second, *dissimulation*, whereby attention and reflection on domination is deflected, blocked or dissipated ; and third, *reification*, through which social relations and the domination they embody are rendered a nonhuman facticity, a product of nature beyond human intervention. J.B.Thompson’s formulation, however, is only the first map of the way in which ideology operates. From a critical perspective, a deeper hermeneutic is required to adequately comprehend ideological phenomena, for such phenomenological processes as are describes above build upon the more fundamental and dynamic human activity of producing meaning. Ideology - and by extention the domination it sustains - must therefore be understood at the level of signification (of making sense). To put it simply, we have to *make* “sense” before this “sense” can be critically judged as ideological or not.

This deeper hermeneutical level of analysis into the dynamics of signification entails negotiating a number of analytical steps. For one, ideology-critique must move away from the idea of essential meanings and from taking fixed values for granted. A naive objectivism which dichotomizes consciousness and social reality, and leaves epistemology

⁷ Thompson, J.B. (1990 : 7)

⁸ Marx, K. & Engels, F. The German Ideology, (1970 : 64), quoted in Woollacott, J. (1992 : 105)

unproblematized is of little help.⁹ We need to recognize that signification is an active, ongoing and intersubjective accomplishment, and that meaning only emerges in the context of everyday life and from the routine practical tasks of living as consciousness confronts, interprets, and acts upon an external social reality.

We need, in other words, to move beyond the distinction that the classical Marxian theory of ideology makes between the ideological in which "reality" appears, and an *a priori* domain of reality consisting of "material" activity uncluttered by processes of signification. As Keane implies, there is no subterranean reality operating "behind the back" of ideology, serving as a foundation which explains the dissimulations of ideology. "The 'material life processes' of civil society do not comprise 'naked' productive activity . . . Social and political life . . . is coextensive with symbolically mediated activity . . . There is nothing specifically social or political - not even the labour process - which is constituted from an Archimedian point 'outside' or 'below' signifying practices."¹⁰

Contrary to Marx's and Engel's understanding of ideology as a *camera obscura*¹¹ - as pure illusion, as an inverted or distorted image of what is "real" - the analysis of ideology must be understood as ". . . an integral part of a broader concern with the characteristics of action and interaction, the forms of power and domination, the nature of social structure, social reproduction and social change, the features of symbolic

⁹ Epistemology is a branch of philosophy that studies the nature and limits of knowledge ; it examines the structure, origin and criteria of knowledge. As such it deals with problems such as sense perception, the relation between the knower and the object known, the possible kinds of knowledge and the degrees of certainty for each kind of knowledge, the nature of truth, and the nature of, and justification for, inferences. Immanuel Kant's epistemology, for example, held that while one could have certainty about the world of experience (*phenomenon*) because one constructs that world, one could not have knowledge of the world as it really is (*noumenon*). Thus, for Kant, since the world of one's experiences is constructed according to mathematical and causal laws, there is no need to justify the universal application of these laws to experience.

¹⁰ Keane, J. (1988 : 223)

¹¹ Marx, K. & Engels, F. (1970 : 47). See fn. 14

forms and their roles in social life".¹² The symbolic forms and ideas through which we express ourselves and understand others are as real as any other realm of human activity. They do not constitute some ethereal "other world" which stands opposed to what is real, but are in fact partially constitutive of what, in our societies, is "real".¹³

In addition, we need to question the traditional Marxist base / superstructure model and its overly-reductionist representation of the media as, on the one hand, a purveyor of ruling class ideology and, on the other hand, the inculcator of false consciousness. To see the media as simply reflecting (economic) reality is to underestimate their signifying capacity - and the proper terrains, apparatuses and practices of ideology. As Keane points out, Marx and Engels understood the birth, rise to dominance and decay of ideologies as being always determined by the "logic of development of the social labour process".¹⁴ Forms of consciousness, that is, were to be understood as being determined by the material conditions of life. As J.B. Thompson interprets this position : "Thinking, conceiving and, more generally, the production of ideas should be regarded, not as autonomous processes and even less as processes which prescribe the course of history, but rather as processes which are interwoven with, and essentially determined by, the mundane activity of human beings collectively producing their means of subsistence".¹⁵

Marx and Engels, in other words, failed to appreciate that ideologies have an independent logic of development, and that ". . . all social and political life - including the forces and relations of production in both their

¹² Thompson, J.B. (1990 : 7)

¹³ Thompson, J.B. (1990 : 10)

¹⁴ In Marx's and Engels's oft-quoted claim : "If in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside-down as in a *camera obscura*, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-processes as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-processes." (1970 : 47)

¹⁵ Thompson, J.B. (1990 : 35)

objective and subjective dimensions - is structured through codes of signification".¹⁶

The Marxist theory of ideology therefore needs to be reformulated outside the parameters of a hierarchy of determinations, dependent always in the last instance on the economic sphere of production. Discursive practices and signifying systems must be accorded a degree of specificity and a relative autonomy, for mediated messages (and the ideologies they bear) are both composed and interpreted in accordance with rules and codes which are of a fundamentally distinct order to those operative in other fields (such as those obtaining at the level of economic production).

However, the concern to avoid the trap of economic reductionism must not allow us to fall into the trap of idealistic autonomization of the ideological level. Stressing the importance of symbolic or linguistic forms is a valid analytical move, but it must not unduly detract attention from the concrete cultural forms obtaining in everyday life. The operations of the media, and ideological phenomena in general, must be approached from a perspective which stresses the *whole* social formation, and which locates them within the context of an always historically specific cultural totality and dynamic. As mentioned above, this involves locating the operations, forms and contents of the media within a theoretical framework informed by a political economy approach to cultural forms, and deploying this approach's analysis of the commodity form in particular.

¹⁶

Keane, J. (1988 : 223)

Indeed, Marx and Engels did not so much "fail to appreciate" the relatively independent developmental logic of ideologies, as they *explicitly rejected* the value and role of ideas in history and in social life. In The German Ideology, for instance, they criticized the "Young Hegelians" such as Feuerbach, Bauer and Stirner, who argued that the real battle to be fought was a battle of ideas, that, by taking up a critical attitude towards received ideas, reality itself could be changed. Marx and Engels denounced this position as ideological, arguing that its consideration of "... conceptions, ideas, in fact all products of consciousness, to which they attribute an independent existence, as the real chains of men" erroneously regarded ideas to be autonomous and efficacious and failed to grasp the real conditions and characteristics of social-historical life. (1970 : 41)

In short, this study maintains that both the semiotic and political-economic are important levels of analysis for understanding the ideological forms within the electronic media environment. In addition, it is only on the basis of understanding both levels that we can seriously endeavour to determine the degree to which individuals are co-constitutive of material and cultural conditions in the production of social reality, and the degree to which individuals are more than mere observers of a structured circularity of symbolic goods.

II.

Poulantzas has noted that economic processes of capitalist production merely reproduce the *places* within the system of production that are to be occupied by the agents of production (workers, overseers, managers). What remains, he contends, is the task of the “. . . reproduction and distribution of the agents themselves to these places”, and it is in terms of this latter reproductive process that ideology must be understood.¹⁷

Capitalism, in other words, can only survive as an ongoing system if ideological structures reconcile concrete individuals to both the class structure and to the class positions which they occupy. Ideology-critique therefore logically requires a notion of subjectivity that can account for the way in which subjects are constituted - and articulate themselves - within cultural practices and discursive formations which operate as a field of ideological struggle.

Antonio Gramsci is perhaps best known for his work in response to the ability of mature capitalism to survive its so-called structural contradictions, despite the devastating economic depression during the

¹⁷ Poulantzas, Classes in Contemporary Capitalism, (1975 : 28), cited Bennett, T. (1992a : 52)

1920's and 1930's. Beginning by arguing against the inherent passivity of any Marxist theory which posits a deterministic model of revolution, Gramsci turns to the superstructure, and sought to determine the position and role of the active subject therein. Gramsci, in other words, completely rejected the economism of his contemporaries, and the orthodox notion that the base has primacy over the superstructure - that is to say, that the superstructure is reducible to a simple "reflex" of the base.¹⁸

It must be noted that Gramsci was opposed to all forms of reductionism - ideological reductionism included. His efforts to register the relative autonomy of ideological realm - of discursive practices and signifying systems - should therefore not be seen as a rejection of the seminal importance of the economic sphere, but rather as means of conceptualizing the relationship between ideological, social, political and economic processes and associations in a more flexible and more dynamic manner. Thus, whereas his contemporary Marxist theorists posit the relationship between the superstructure and the base in simple functionalist terms, Gramsci argues that the base determines which *forms* of consciousness are possible within the superstructure. That is, the base determines the *framework* within which various outcomes are possible. Gramsci's important point is that this determination is far from automatic.

Seeking to distance himself from Marx's traditional interpretation of ideology as false consciousness, Gramsci identifies the phenomenon as "... the terrain where men become conscious of themselves and of their tasks", the terrain where they are constituted as "subjects". For Gramsci, social antagonisms are not easily reducible to class conflict, and have to be understood as taking place between complex popular forces constituted through a plurality of antagonisms emerging at the political and ideological

¹⁸ This much is clear from his comment : "It is absurd to think of a purely objective production . . . if one excludes all voluntaristic elements, or if only other people's will whose intentions one reckon as an objective element in the general interplay of forces, one mutilates reality itself." (1971 : 165)

levels. Class power, he argues, no longer has a visible point of concentration in the state, but has become diffused throughout society and its cultural practices. Political struggle therefore has to accommodate these cultural forces, and can no longer seriously entertain economistic views which simply relegate ideology to a derivative sphere of appearance (rather than essence).

Wood observes that at the centre of Gramsci's politics is a reformulation of the concept of "civil society", seen as a system of superstructural institutions, intermediating between the state and the economy.¹⁹ Whereas Marx before him transformed the Hegelian distinction between the state and civil society by denying the universality of the state and insisting that the state expressed the particularities of "civil society" and its class relations, Gramsci appropriates the concept to "... mark out the terrain of a new kind of struggle which would take the battle against capitalism not only to its economic foundations but to its cultural and ideological roots in everyday life."²⁰

Gramsci's approach is to conceive of ideology as a whole ('real') social process, and as a crucial field of symbolic struggle. In doing so, he elevates the analytical status of lived experiences, cultural practices and

¹⁹ "Civil society" refers to an arena of (at least potential) freedom outside the state, a space for autonomy, voluntary association and plurality or even conflict, guaranteed by the kind of "formal democracy" that has evolved in the West. As Wood (1995 : 245) argues, the concept is also meant to reduce the capitalist system (or the "economy") to one of many spheres in the plural and heterogeneous complexity of modern society. Whether it achieves this by marking off a sphere set against the coercions of both the state and the capitalist economy [eg. Cohen, J., (1982)], or by encompassing the "economy" within a larger sphere of multiple non-state institutions and relations [eg. Keane, J., (1988)], the concept of civil society emphasises the plurality of social relations and practices among which the capitalist economy takes its place as one among many. Unfortunately, as Wood continues, while Gramsci unambiguously used the concept as a weapon against capitalism, not an accommodation to it, in its current usage the concept no longer has this unequivocally anti-capitalist intent. For in attacking Marxist "reductionism" or "economism", the "civil society" argument rejects the ideas of an overarching power structure, a totalizing unity, and systemic coercions - it rejects, in other words, the capitalist system's expansionary drive and its capacity to penetrate every aspect of social life.

²⁰ Wood, M. (1995 : 245)

modes of expression - with their resultant ways of seeing and meaning - to key hermeneutic categories for meaningfully understanding the modes, terrains and practices by which symbolic resources are manipulated in the service of domination.²¹ Such an approach, according to Peter Dahlgren, brings the normative and subjective dimensions of consciousness, and even its affective elements into the theoretical equation, "... adding nuances to previously overly rationalistic treatments of ideology".²²

Central to Gramsci's theory is the concept of "hegemony", contained within the sphere of civil society. Defined as "political, intellectual and moral leadership", hegemony basically consists in the capacity of a dominant class to articulate its interests and the interests of other social groups, and thus to become the leading force of a "collective will".²³ According to Gramsci, the elites' "cultural hegemony" over society is sustained in numerous complex ways, including tolerance of opposing political philosophies and a pious but essentially hollow commitment to liberal-democratic values.

Gramsci's concern with discursive formations and ideological fields of struggle was something taken up by Louis Althusser. Writing in the 1970's, Althusser sought to extend Gramsci's efforts to effect a break from Marxist ideological reductionism of a economistic and reflective kind, and to thereby account for the relative autonomy of ideology - as a signifying social practice - from the economic mode of production.

²¹ Gramsci, A. (1971)

²² Dahlgren, P. (1987 : 31)

²³ According to Gramsci (1971 : 57-8), the supremacy of a social group assumes two forms : "domination" and "intellectual and moral direction". Thus : "A social group is dominant over enemy groups which it tends to 'liquidate' or subject with armed force, and is directive over affinal and allied groups. A social group can, and indeed must, already exercise 'leadership' before winning governmental power (this indeed is one of the principle conditions for the winning of such power) ; it subsequently becomes dominant when it exercises power, but even if it holds it firmly in its grasp, it must continue to 'lead' as well."

Althusser's work was based on an anti-empiricist epistemology which disputed claims that the knowing subject could abstract the essence of a real object. Knowledge, Althusser proposed, should be conceived of as production. Similarly, ideologies - as "vicious" forms of knowledge - should not be understood as an intellectual abstraction, but rather as concrete social processes embodied in the material signifying practices of a collectivity of "ideological state apparatuses".²⁴ Such apparatuses, he argues, function according to the common ideology of the ruling social class, and confer an all-encompassing unity on superstructural phenomena. Through various socializing processes, the superstructures therefore serve to reproduce the labour-force, and consequently, the capitalist forces of production.

According to Althusser, then, ideology has to be understood as "lived experience" in its various, mystified forms. Ideology, he proposes, can only enter experience, shape perception and beliefs, and alter conduct because it takes on a "real", material force. That is to say, ideology can only serve as a medium through which people interpret, experience and engage with the world as subjects because it is inscribed in their traditions, institutions, customs, apparatuses and practices of everyday life.

Althusser's analytical framework is based on dividing society into separate levels : infrastructure (economic base) and superstructures, with the latter itself containing the two levels of the politico-legal and the ideological. While all three are granted a degree of independence - such that they cannot be collapsed into one, as each have their own characteristics and ability to determine the others - Althusser insists on superstructural determination *in the last instance* by the economic base. For in claiming that ". . . it is possible and necessary to think what characterises the essential of the existence and nature of the superstructure

²⁴ Althusser (1971 : 126-7) lists these "ideological state apparatuses" as churches, families, legal institutions, the political system and political parties, trade unions, communication networks consisting of the media, and cultural forms.

on the basis of reproduction"²⁵, he clearly regards the infrastructure as the effective determinant of the entire social structure.

Thus, despite his efforts to demonstrate that the themes, concepts and representations through which people mediate the world and "live" in an imaginary relation are not fundamentally and singularly determined by economic factors, Althusser is unable to move away from a position which held ideology to have an irreducible material existence. The autonomy he grants the signifying social practices of ideology therefore proves to be purely nominal, in as much as its action is conceived as being entirely subservient to the needs and requirements of the economic life of a society.²⁶

It can be argued that aside from this latent economism, Althusser's approach also comes dangerously close to functionalism.²⁷ This becomes clear when one considers his conception of ideology as a "social cement" - that is, as a collection of symbolic forms generating the practical, "commonsense" ideas and beliefs which supply the institutionally appropriate rules of conduct for citizens, and which seamlessly structure the way in which they make sense of day-to-day life. Individuals, according to this understanding, are merely subjects in the process of history, and are "taught" the rules of a pre-existing social order. The superstructure is

²⁵ Althusser, L. (1971 : 131)

²⁶ Bennett, T. (1992a : 53)

²⁷ As a general social theory, *functionalism* stresses the mutual interdependence among the institutions and customs of any particular society, and sets out to explain how social order is achieved by the functions that such institutions perform. Thus, in complex societies like the USA, functional analysis will typically argue that religion and the family support values that function to reinforce the operations of the democratic state and the market economy. The functionalist perspective, however, is epistemologically flawed as it carries with it certain ideological assumptions. As Ang (1996 : 6) points out, functionalism problematizes behaviour or activity in the light of potential conformity to, or disruption of, "normal" social process and ordered social structure. As far as the mass communicational order is concerned, the upshot of this "myth of cultural integration" is the image of the "passive audience". As Ang (1996 : 7) observes, the audience is taken to be "...merely a function of the systemic design, and privatized reception completely subjected to the requirements of centralized transmission."

itself defined by this “unifying” function - in such a way that Gramsci’s former distinction between the state and civil society completely collapses. For Althusser considers all ideological forms to contribute unproblematically to the reproduction of existing social relations, with ideological state apparatuses such as the media simply serving to reproduce and reinforce “primary definitions”. In not analysing exactly *how* this function is performed, Althusser assumes the social structure to be a continuously (and unproblematically) achieved outcome, such that resistance or social change is inconceivable. His position, in other words, tends to represent capitalism as a totally coherent social system (“one-dimensional” even), free of internal conflict at either the economic, political or ideological levels.²⁸

Althusser’s structural Marxism, then, fails to continue Gramsci’s theoretical shift away from economistic and reductionist approaches to ideology and social structure, and to develop the dialectical nature of the relationship between base and superstructure as initiated by his Italian predecessor. The problem with Althusser’s work, then, is not so much that he stresses the unavoidable relation between the ideological, social and economic levels, but rather, as E.P. Thompson argues, that he conceives of this determination as a closed process, rather than as a structured set of pressures or limits. As E.P. Thompson continues, “Althusser’s structuralism . . . fails to effect the distinction between a structured process, which, while subject to determinate pressures, remains open-ended and only partially-determined, and a structured whole, within which the process is encapsulated”.²⁹

This is not to argue that Gramsci’s own account is unproblematic, for in many respects his work is also somewhat thin on sustained cultural critique. His conception of the individual as the victim of hegemonic forces, for instance, is not dissimilar to the Althusserian “subject-in-

²⁸ Bennett, T. (1992a : 53)

²⁹ Thompson, E.P. (1978 : 290)

ideology". Both take too much for granted concerning the production and consumption of symbolic forms, the channels of communication, and the thought patterns and "subjectivities" of individuals. Indeed, one could well argue that both Gramsci and Althusser consider the dominant ideology to have an irresistible power to inform the sense-making processes of its subjects - to "hail" consenting subjects through the apparently obvious and normal rituals of everyday living. This exposes their accounts to charges that they are little more than elaborations of the traditional Marxist notion of "false consciousness".

Moreover, both Althusser and Gramsci's accounts underestimate the ambiguity, fissures and ideological excesses of media texts that permit polysemic (often subversive) symbolic constructions by an active, semi-autonomous interpretive audience. While it may appear as though Gramsci's notion of hegemony seeks to account for this, his analytical strategy could well be accused of simply side-stepping this important facet of social reality. Indeed Gramsci's theory of hegemony seems somewhat self-verifying. As LeMahieu points out, not only is the argument that social stability is ensured by the maintenance of value-consensus essentially tautological, but the notion of hegemony is sufficiently elastic to explain any apparent deviations from the norm, with every exception becoming part of the rule. Dissent and criticism, in other words, are identified as having a "reinforcement effect" on systems of bourgeois capitalism which so loudly champion the "freedom of speech".³⁰

Nevertheless, certain aspects of their work offer useful opportunities for combining Marxist studies with other critical approaches, and facilitating the development of significantly new lines of approach to the study of the media. As Tony Bennett argues, the stress Althusser placed on the *active* role of ideology, on the part it played in shaping the consciousness of social agents, ". . . formed the central conduit through which developments

³⁰ LeMahieu, D.L.. (1988 : 15-6, fn.27)

in structuralism and semiology have entered into and lastingly altered Marxist approaches to the media in placing questions concerning the politics of signification at least on a par with the traditional Marxist concern with the analysis of patterns of media ownership and control".³¹

This structuralist and semiological paradigm is critical for contemporary mass communications research. In allowing a suspension of involvement with the problems of determination it enables attention to be focussed on the specificity and autonomy of media systems of signification and representation. A theoretically-informed shift away from seeing the media as merely reflecting and sustaining an already existing consensus, towards their conceptualization as institutions *producing* or *manufacturing* patterns of meaning will allow us to take seriously the notions of "discourse", the "subject", and the media as "... a key terrain where 'consent' is won or lost".³² In focusing attention on the internal characteristics and processes of signifying systems, conceiving relationships between discourses in terms of articulation rather than determination, the semiotic model of ideological forms allows us to observe the "passage" of meanings into the "field of ideological struggle".

In addition, semiotic's linguistic paradigm focusses attention on the way in which the signification process - while largely occurring beyond the level of our immediate awareness - involves the simultaneous articulation of social and symbolic elements (with the latter being dominant). With meaning emerging at the interface between linguistic and non-linguistic phenomena, and becoming ideological in this force-field³³, the semiotic model suggests the possibility of identifying the analytical "moments" at which this occurs.

³¹ Bennett, T. (1992a : 53)

³² Hall, S. *et al.* (1978 : 220), cited Woollacott, J (1992 : 109)

³³ Hall, S., *et al.* (1978 : 220), cited Woollacott, J. (1992 : 109)

What is basically missing from theoretical reformulations of the notion of ideology in the Marxist framework are the question of *how* meaning is produced within a particular material and historical context, and *how* ideological structures emerge - beyond the conscious awareness of their subjects - as a function of discourse and of the logic of more general social processes. Significantly, this is what can be gleaned from the structuralist and semiological engagement with the internal mechanisms through which signifying systems operate, and through which meanings (and secondary meanings) are produced in media texts. It is to these approaches that we now turn.

5.

**“Towards a social semiotic understanding
of meaning construction”**

As a mode of thinking and a method of analysis, structuralism basically analyses large-scale systems by examining the relations and functions of the smallest constituent elements of such systems (which range from human language and cultural practices to folktales and literary texts). There are four procedures basic to structuralism. First, structural analysis examines unconscious infrastructures of cultural phenomena ; second, it regards the elements of infrastructures as “relational” and not as independent entities; third, it attends singlemindedly to “system” ; and fourth, it propounds general laws accounting for the underlying organizing patterns of phenomena.

The structuralist understanding of society and individuals is based on the model of language (rather than the other way around), insofar as it postulates language’s systemic, collective and relational quality as being best suited to explain social life. Structure, that is, is not conceived as a template or external frame simply limiting and constraining meaning, but rather as being constitutive of meaning. As Barthes puts it, structure is a paradoxical idea, being “. . . a system with neither close nor centre”.¹

Semiotics, or the “science of signs”, basically designates a field of study that analyses sign systems, codes, and conventions of all kinds, from human to animal and sign languages; from the jargon of fashion to the lexicon of food; from codes of architectures and medicine to the conventions of myth and literature. Semiology is not a method of analysis as such, but rather constitutes, as Janet Woollocott points out, a

¹ Barthes, R. (1977 : 159)

constellation of studies in art, literature, anthropology and the mass media which in some way developed or made use of structuralism and linguistic theory, emerging as it did from the study of language problems and the structure of language.²

Language thus serves as the paradigmatic model of semiotics for interpreting all signifying systems.³ As the medium for producing meaning, language is seen as a structure of variant possibilities - the arrangement of limited elements in a signifying chain. What distinguishes semiotics, however, is its insistence on the importance of the sign - as the concept differentiating between various elements in the process of speech (meaning production) - and the isolation of the *signifier* from the *signified* as objects of study. Formal semiotics rejects the notion of referentiality (or at least pushes it into a secondary position), and so excludes consideration of the "real" world. In the view of its theoreticians, the world has to be "made to mean". Language is a social practice, and as such it does not so much express the world as it articulates it - indeed, articulates *upon* it.

Semiotics considers language to pre-exist individual speakers, who cannot in any absolute sense be considered the "authors" of the statements they make or of the meanings they express in language. In Stuart Hall's words : "To speak a language is not only to express our innermost, original thoughts, it is also to activate the vast range of meanings which are already embedded in our language and cultural systems".⁴

Semiotics thus disputes the idea of language being a bridge between the interior and exterior realm, and maintains that the meanings of words are not fixed in a one-to-one relation to objects or events in the world

² Woollocott, J. (1992 : 94)

³ Language, that is, apprehended from the perspective of structural linguistics, which sees language as systems that operate more or less independently of their expressive or representational function, having forms which are not developed by expressive human beings but rather having simply a self-referential character. From this standpoint, objects of the world have no self-evident identity or individuality outside of the words that denote them.

⁴ Hall, S. (1994 : 122)

outside language. The meaning of an element in a structure derives from the structure's internal relationships - from the shared assumptions, conventions and systems of rules underlying the structure - rather than any external influence or determinants. What signifies, in other words, is the positionality of particular terms within a set, with each positioning marking a pertinent difference in the classificatory scheme involved.⁵ For example, a particular action is impolite not because of its intrinsic qualities, but because of certain relational features which differentiates it from polite actions. Similarly, we know what "night" is because it is not "day". From the perspective of semiotics, then, meaning arises in the relation of similarity and difference which words have to other words within the language code, an effect attained through discourse's "logic of arrangement".⁶

The field of structural-semiotics was largely pioneered by Ferdinand de Saussure's work in the field of linguistics, in which he was concerned to distinguish between what is internal to language and that which is external to it. While he insisted that language is a "social fact", and considered such studies as ethnology, political and social history, geography and the history of institutions to be essential to language phenomena, his primary concern was with the infrastructure (the structural economy) of language common to all speakers and with the underlying rules and conventions that function at an unconscious level. His approach was therefore based on the exclusion of "external linguistics", and taking what remained as a larger object of study, that of sign systems generally, which he called "semiology".⁷

⁵ Hall, S. (1992 : 71)

⁶ Hall, S. (1994 : 123)

⁷ As Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress (1994 : 41) point out, Saussure's entire work was informed by a theoretical strategy of categorizing and sharply dichotomizing from a vast undifferentiated field, and then eliminating one half of each dichotomy on the basis of some absolute boundary. This strategy was less than perfect, as will be demonstrated below through a discussion of Voloshinov's work.

One such sign system is verbal language as such (*langage*), which Saussure categorized into two : *langue* (the abstract system of rules underlying speech) and *parole* (human speech : literally “words”). The latter was conceived of as an intrinsically unordered morass, an infinite and arbitrary combination of the elements of *langue* by individual speakers, and was discarded as an impossible object for systematic study. Saussure’s concern was thus with the study of rules rather than expressions; models rather than data; *langue* (language) rather than *parole* (speech). He further divided *langue* into its *synchronic* aspect, which involved the study of a particular stage of language (the system as it exists at any given time, for a particular language community), and its *diachronic* aspect, which involved the study of changes in the system over time. Arguing that systemic change can only proceed in a piecemeal and irrational manner, Saussure argued that diachronic surface phenomena defy systematization, and once again considered the synchronic “deep structures” to be the proper field of study for semiotics.

Saussure’s comparison of language to chess exemplifies this approach. In this metaphor, the past history of the game is irrelevant to the situation reached at a given point, and the potential of any piece depends crucially on its relations with other pieces, and not on its intrinsic qualities. As Saussure suggests, we could agree to replace the white queen with a lump of chalk without affecting the state of play.⁸

Within this scheme of synchronic linguistics, signs are taken to have a *value* (ie. a place within a system or structure) and a *signification* (ie. a relation of reference, existing outside of language). Saussure’s concern was clearly with the the former. Signs, he argued, have a double form, consisting of *signifiers* (carriers of meaning) and *signifieds* (the meaning itself), and his interest lay with signifiers. Saussure further believed signifiers themselves to have a double form, being made up of a

⁸ Sampson, G. (1984 : 354)

material entity (for example, a physical sound), and an image of that entity (the mental event). Characteristically, he considered the study of the material sign to be a discipline outside linguistics.

Saussure's descriptive-analytical linguistic project has been invoked by many later semioticians in support of an abstract, autonomous internal linguistics. This is particularly so with respect to his notion of the "arbitrariness of signs" principle, which holds that there is no necessary or "natural" connection between a signifier and its signified. This is somewhat unfair, as Hodge and Kress point out, for rather than being unequivocally opposed to a social basis for semiotics, his work rather reflects a deep ambivalence towards this project.⁹ It would be more accurate, they contend, to argue that Saussure's deference of the study of the relationship between semiotics and "reality" ("external linguistics") stemmed not so much from the idea that there was no connection, but rather from his understanding of the unlimited and therefore incomprehensible nature of the social determination of language. At the deepest level, they argue, Saussure was concerned with order, and his desire was to stay with what can be fixed and therefore known.¹⁰

Christopher Norris makes a similar case. He sees Saussure's exclusion of the referential aspect of language as a methodological convenience, a heuristic device used to demonstrate and describe the network of relationships and differences that exist at the level of the signifier and the signified. For Saussure's followers, on the other hand, this bracketing is treated as a high principle, with the "real" seen as a construct of intra-linguistic processes and structures that allow no access to a world outside the prison-house of discourse.¹¹

⁹ Hodge, R. & Kress, G. (1994 : 46)
¹⁰ Hodge, R. & Kress, G. (1994 : 42)
¹¹ Norris, C. (1990 : 185)

This is particularly true of Claude Levi-Strauss, whose work in the domain of anthropology and myth studies brought the structuralist principle to a wider audience. Premised on the belief that man is a bearer of changeless "truths of reason", and inspired by the notion that cultures classify the world through linguistic and semantic structures, Levi-Strauss's work aimed at developing a general, closed, abstract, formalistic science of thought - an "original logic" proceeding from the "structure of the mind" - capable of articulating universal "laws of signification", or a universal transformational cultural "grammar".¹²

Considering the perspective of structural linguistics appropriate for culture and thought, as well for language, Levi-Strauss attempted to demonstrate that the cultural features of tribal societies are assemblages of codes reflecting certain universal principles of human thought. Accordingly, he argued that by moving from the surface narrative of particular myths to the generative system or the structure out of which they are produced, one could show how different myths (at the surface level) belonged to the same family or constellation set of myths (at the deep-structure level). All schema and structures of meaning are therefore related to one another (and are ultimately reducible to a more general, and "deeper", embracing structure) and mutually derivable from each other by logical operations and systematic permutations, such as inversion, transposition and substitution. Thus, for Levi-Strauss, what appears to be a "free" construction of a particular ideological meaning is actually a transformation worked on a single, basic, ideological grid.

In this semiotic framework, the ideological discourses of a society can be conceived of as arising from classificatory schemes consisting of ideological elements or premises. Particular discursive formulations are ideological not because of the manifest bias or distortion of their surface contents, but rather because they are generated out of, or are

¹² Levi-Strauss, C. (1966 : 16)

transformations based on, a limited ideological matrix or set.¹³ From the standpoint of ideology critique, then, it would seem more important to study this ideological grid - to explore "the life of signs at the heart of social life" - than the particular transformations based on its limited inventories.

Saussure's linguistic project - and centrally the "arbitrariness-of-signs" principle - was further developed by the French semiotician Roland Barthes, whose work in the field of "narratology" seeks to analyse the systematic features and functions of narratives, and attempts to isolate a finite set of rules to account for the infinite set of real and possible narratives. His early work on advertising, for example, argues that photographic signs are "polysemic", and that the varied meanings they contain are reducible to the use of an additional, much less diffuse, linguistic message which acts as an "anchor" fixing meaning.¹⁴ Signs thus organize meanings by connoting different sets of ideas and beliefs in the audience, or different "lexicons" (such as love of animals and the perceived neutrality of photographs). Signs, in other words, reduce and fix the construction of meaning into prescribed paths.

In his later work, however, Barthes came to see texts as being made up of the interweaving of a number of different elements ("codes"), with the apparent "meaning" of the given text being merely an effect produced by the resultant combination of these different, essentially "meaning-less" elements. Furthermore, these elements are taken to refer not to some extra-linguistic "reality" but to other texts and to other codes, such that the single fixed meaning of "denotation" is itself only the product of the much less determinate play of connotation.

¹³ Hall, S. (1992 : 72)
¹⁴ Barthes, R. (1977)

Barthes's later work is significant in that it halts the ongoing modern "diminishment" of the individual. Structuralism seems to shift attention away from individual human consciousness and choice, portray the self as a construct and consequence of impersonal systems, and individuals as neither originating nor controlling the codes and conventions of their social existence, mental life, or linguistic experience. In contrast, Barthes's idea that polysemy is the reality of each and every text shifts the problem of the production of meaning ever more strongly on to the "reader". For not only do texts have only a virtual status as a physical entity, and only become a meaningful reality as the result of the consumer, but they also always contain a "limited" plurality, making claims to a single meaning untenable.

Barthes's attention to areas not formerly known for their meaning is an exemplar of the use of the semiological approach as a preamble to ideological critique of the social order's dominant symbolic codes. Thus, writing of a photograph of twenty women novelists that appeared in the weekly magazine Elle, he writes :

"If we are to believe [the image] the woman of letters is a remarkable zoological species : she brings forth pell mell, novels and children. We are introduced, for example, to *Jacqueline Lenoir (two daughters, one novel)*; *Marina Grey (one son, one novel)*; *Nicole Dutreil (two sons, four novels)*, etc. What does this mean ? This : to write is a glorious but bold activity; the writer is an 'artist', one recognizes that he is entitled to a little bohemianism. As he is in general entrusted - at least in the France of Elle - with giving society reasons for its clear conscience, he must, after all, be paid for his services : one tacitly grants him the right to some individuality. But make no mistake : let no women believe that they can take advantage of this place without having submitted to the eternal status of womanhood. Women are on the earth to give children to men; let them write as much as they like, let them decorate their condition, but

above all, let them not depart from it : let their biblical fate not be disturbed by the promotion which is conceded to them, and let them pay immediately, by the tribute of their motherhood for this bohemianism which has a natural link with a writer's life."¹⁵

Barthes's analysis goes deeper than the exposition of the codes, conventions and stereotypical notions of gender and social roles, for he argues elsewhere that the form of the photograph itself has its own codes and systems of rules. A photograph, that is, works on the principles of "having been there" and "this is the evidence". As such, the photograph is unlike other signifying forms in that it suggests that it only *records*, rather than transforms meaning, and pretends thereby to be a "message without a code".¹⁶ From a semiological perspective, then, the way in which a photograph presents meaning is patently ideological.

Structuralist-semiotic theories move beyond Gramscian and Althusserian structural analyses by arguing that meaning is not simply contained within events, and merely transferred through language, but is quite crucially a social production, a practice, with language being one medium through which specific meanings are produced. In so dethroning the "referential" notion of language¹⁷, structural-semiotics seeks to uncover the "grammar" on the basis of which domination is implicated in and sustained by socially-produced language codes and the structural logic of specific sign systems of the public sphere. The codes which organize signs into systems - such as language - signify, (that is, serve to prestructure) the possible range of meanings any particular sign will convey. A sign's logical or associative connections with other signs in the code thus delimits its potential range of interpretation - the code

¹⁵ Barthes, R. (1972 : 56)

¹⁶ Barthes, R. (1977), cited in Woollacott, J. (1992 : 99)

¹⁷ The "referential" notion of language proposes that the meaning of a particular term or sentence can be validated simply by looking at what, in the real world, it references.

itself serves to prestructure meanings, even to evoke whole sets of pre-existing assumptions and definitions.

However, if we are to agree with the proposition that meanings are not given, but produced, then logic dictates that different kinds of meanings can be ascribed to the same events. This necessitates an inquiry into how particular kinds of meanings get systematically and regularly constructed around particular events. Clearly, certain meanings are produced regularly because they win a kind of credibility, legitimacy, or taken-for-grantedness for themselves. We need to understand how this happens. We need, as Hall points out, to understand the ways in which alternative constructions are marginalized, down-graded, or de-legitimized, and how the dominant account warrants itself as *the* account.¹⁸ This involves exploring the ways in which the dominant meaning sustains a limit, or ban or proscription over alternative or competing definitions, and the ways in which the institutions responsible for describing and explaining the events of the world succeed in maintaining a preferred or delimited range of meanings in the dominant systems of communication.

How people act depends in part on how the given situation in which they act is defined. The positioning of politics in relation to everyday life and the fostering of particular "stacks of knowledge", "typifications of social reality" and "zones of relevance" by existing social institutions and technologies are therefore of vital social and political importance. As Carey observes, reality is a scarce resource, and like any scarce resource, ". . . it is there to be struggled over, allocated to various purposes and projects, endowed with given meanings and potentials, spent and conserved, rationalized and distributed." The fundamental form of power, he continues, is the ". . . power to define, allocate and display this

¹⁸ Hall, S. (1992 : 67)

resource. For once the blank canvas of the world is portrayed and featured, it is also preempted and restricted".¹⁹

Recent developments in the theory of language have demonstrated the activity and effectivity of signification as a process which actively constructs cognitive worlds rather than simply passively reflecting a pre-existing reality. In the same way, the communication media - as complex networks of ideological-symbolic formations - must be identified as key "definers" of reality. The media, as Bennett observes, are agencies of mediation, proposing frameworks for the interpretation of events, moulding or structuring our consciousness in ways that are socially and politically consequential.²⁰ Which events are "reported" by the media and the ways in which they are signified therefore have an enormous bearing on the ways in which we perceive the world and thus, if action is at all related to thought, on the ways in which we act within it. Far from simply reflecting an already existing reality, then, the media are very much a part of social reality, contributing to its contours and to the logic and direction of its development via the socially articulated way in which they shape our perceptions.

II.

However, if we are to take the above conceptualization of the media seriously, then our understanding of language and other sign systems - and our exploration of the nature of signification itself - must proceed within a broader framework than that pursued by Saussure and his followers. Such a framework would need to stress not only the independent "materiality" of the signifier, but also the fact that the production of meaning is a *social process* which takes place within a

¹⁹ Carey, J. (1992 : 87)

²⁰ Bennett, T. (1992b : 288)

wider setting in which the action of social forces is powerful but not incomprehensible.

We need, in other words, to reconstitute the semiotic project by stressing the social dimension, so as to hold onto the project's original insights into the activity and effectivity of the signification process, while at the same time finding a place for both the material determination of meaning and for general socio-cultural constraints on individual thought. The work of the Russian linguistic theoretician V.N. Voloshinov stands as a potentially decisive theoretical intervention in this reconstruction of the unity of the "science of signs".²¹

Basing their argument on Voloshinov's text Marxism and the Philosophy of Language (1973), Hodge and Kress argue that we need to invert Saussure's prohibitions and rewrite them as the basic premises of an alternative social semiotics. This, they contend, will entail identifying culture, society and politics as intrinsic to semiotics ; recognizing the existence of other semiotic systems alongside verbal language; and attending to language at the level of *parole* (the act of speaking), and the concrete signifying practices in other codes.²² Turning Saussure's doctrines on their head would also mean taking seriously the concepts of diachrony, time, history, and change ; as well as the processes of signification, the transactions between signifying systems, and structures of reference. An alternative semiotics must, in other words, ultimately reveal the importance of the (changing) structures of the signified, and the material nature of signs.²³

A central problem with the Saussurian semiotic tradition - which Voloshinov calls "abstract objectivism" - is its identification of the system of language as being the sum total of linguistic phenomena and its

²¹ Hodge, R. & Kress, G. (1994 : 40)

²² Hodge, R. & Kress, G. (1994 : 42)

²³ Hodge, R. & Kress, G. (1994 : 43)

rejection of both the material and social dimensions.²⁴ However, Voloshinov was not only challenged by Saussure's dichotomy between *la langue* (language system) and *la parole* (speech act, utterance), but also by the conceptual separation of synchrony from diachrony in the investigation of verbal communication. These dichotomies were fatal, Voloshinov argued : first, because they led Saussurian semiotics to reject the speech act (the utterance) as something individual - when in fact all speech acts emerge from an exchange between individuals whose consciousness is already constructed ; and second, because, blinded to the fact that ". . . the forms of signs are conditioned above all by the social organization of the participants involved and also by the immediate conditions of their interaction", Saussurian semiotics could not account for the fact that when these forms change, ". . . then so does the sign".²⁵

According to Voloshinov, all utterances are profoundly social phenomena. Signs, that is, arise only in *interindividual territory*, that is, between individuals *organized socially*, (such that they comprise a group), and are a construct of human interaction.²⁶ Saussurians, however, were not interested in the relationship of the sign to the actual reality it reflects or to the individual who is its originator, but only in the relationship of the sign to sign within a closed system already accepted and authorized. Thus, whereas the verbal sign is a speech act that necessarily includes as inseparable components the active participation of the speaker (writer) on the one hand, and the hearer (reader) on the other, Saussurian semiotics considers only ". . . the inner logic of the system of signs itself, taken, as in algebra, completely independently of the meanings that give signs their content".²⁷ For Voloshinov, this approach is unacceptable, for, as he argues, the specificity of any sign system consists precisely in its being

²⁴ It should be noted that Saussure himself was somewhat ambivalent on this point, as is evident from his statement : "I believe that the study of external linguistics phenomena is most fruitful ; but to say that we cannot understand the internal linguistic organism without studying external phenomena is wrong". (1974 : 22)

²⁵ Voloshinov, V.N. (1973 : 21)

²⁶ Voloshinov, V.N. (1973 : 12)

²⁷ Matejka and Titunik, in translators's introduction to Voloshinov, V.N. (1973 : 2)

located between organized individuals, in its being the medium of their communication".²⁸ In other words, an account has to be given of the sign's determination by the social and the material.

Voloshinov's concern was therefore not only with the sign itself, but with the laws governing the system of signs in their development within human society. Here his work overlaps in certain respects with questions raised by Charles Sanders Pierce, particularly Pierce's stress on *process* in the study of signs, and his interpretation of semiosis as a "transaction", rather than a language "structure" or a quality of the text.

"By semiosis I mean an action, an influence, which is, or involves, a co-operation of *three* subjects, such as a sign, its object, and its interpretant, this tri-relative influence not being in any way resolvable into actions between parts".²⁹ According to Pierce, while this "interpretant" - that is, those further ideas linked to a sign, the predicate of any proposition - is capable of almost limitless generation, an infinite semiosis, rather like the process of free association, it is always subject to two limits : those determined by its relations with its objects (ie. its material existence), and those controlled by what he called "habits" (ie. culturally specific rules of thought and inference).³⁰

Voloshinov, like Pierce, does not consider language to be a monolithic phenomenon, imposing its irresistible unity on a helpless society. On the contrary, society is characterized by struggle and conflict and constantly renegotiated relations. The process of semiosis is seen to reflect this in its typical forms. The close link which Voloshinov draws between semiotics, ideology and the socio-material conditioning of the sign demonstrates this point.

²⁸ Matejka and Titunik, in translators's introduction to Voloshinov, V.N. (1973 : 3)
²⁹ Pierce, C.S., Collected Papers, (p.484), cited Hodge, R. & Kress, G. (1994 : 45)
³⁰ Hodge, R. & Kress, G. (1994 : 45)

"Without signs", Voloshinov writes, "there is no ideology. . . Everything ideological possesses semiotic 'value'." ³¹ Yet every ideological sign, the verbal sign included, he continues, ". . . in coming about through the process of social intercourse, is defined by the *social purview* of the given time period and the given social group".³² The ideological form is therefore a part of reality, ". . . just as is every physical body, any instrument of production, or any product for consumption".³³ However, in contradiction to these other phenomena, it ". . . reflects and refracts another reality outside itself." That is to say, while every sign is a material segment of reality, possessing some kind of material embodiment - whether in sound, physical mass, colour, movements of the body, or the like - it is always only a ". . . reflection, a shadow of reality". Since signs can therefore distort reality or be true to it, or simply perceive it from a certain point of view, they all need criteria of ideological evaluation, such as truth, falsity, correctness, fairness, goodness, etc.³⁴

One of the tasks of the study of ideology, Voloshinov writes, is to trace the social life of the sign. "Only so approached can the problem of the relationship between the sign and existence find its concrete expression ; only then will the process of the causal shaping of the sign by existence stand out as a process of genuine existence-to-sign transit, of genuine dialectical refraction of existence in the sign".³⁵ In undertaking this task, certain basic methodological prerequisites must be respected : first, ideology may not be divorced from the material reality of the sign ; second, signs may not be divorced from the concrete forms of social interaction (signs, that is, are part of organized social intercourse and cannot exist, as such, outside it) ; and third, communication and the forms of communication may not be divorced from the material basis.³⁶

³¹ Voloshinov, V.N. (1973 : 9)

³² Voloshinov, V.N. (1973 : 21)

³³ Voloshinov, V.N. (1973 : 9)

³⁴ Voloshinov, V.N. (1973 : 9-11)

³⁵ Voloshinov, V.N. (1973 : 21)

³⁶ Hodge, R. & Kress, G. (1994 : 43)

Ideology, it must be remembered, is not some characteristic or attribute of symbolic forms or symbolic systems *as such*. As J.B.Thompson points out, whether symbolic forms or systems are ideological, and the extent to which they are, “. . . depends on the ways in which they are used and understood in a specific social context”.³⁷ The study of ideology, J.B.Thompson continues, is therefore not concerned with simply categorizing and analysing a system of thought or belief, nor with analysing a symbolic form or system taken in and for itself. “Rather, we are concerned with some of what could be called *the social uses of symbolic forms*. We are concerned with whether, to what extent and how (if at all) symbolic forms serve to establish and sustain relations of domination in the social contexts within which they are produced, transmitted and received.”³⁸

Another important analytical tool in Voloshinov’s framework is the concept of ‘accent’, which Hodge and Kress describe as “. . . a particular inflection which gives a different social meaning to an apparently common set of signs, just as happens with various accents of speech which mark class and regional identity”.³⁹ Accents are seen to affect the force and meaning of signs, by connecting them with different life experiences and values.

Language systems are typically “multi-accentual”, in so far as their apparently common code is refracted by different class or group positions. The same set of signifiers, that is, can be variously accented. Far from being a unitary set of meanings or texts, imposed from above in a “take-it-or-leave it” kind of way, language is inherently a collective phenomena. Struggle, negotiation, recreation and resolution of difference are therefore

³⁷ Thompson, J.B. (1990 : 8)

³⁸ Thompson, J.B. (1990 : 8)

³⁹ Hodge, R. & Kress, G. (1994 : 44)

central to any semiotic inquiry into ideological phenomena, and without the struggle for mastery of discourse, signs lose their force.⁴⁰

As Voloshinov puts it :

"Existence reflected in the sign is not merely reflected but refracted. How is this refraction of existence in the ideological sign determined ? By an intersecting of differently oriented social interests in every ideological sign. Sign becomes an arena of class struggle. This social multi-accentuality of the ideological sign is a very crucial aspect . . . A sign that has been withdrawn from the pressures of the social struggle - which, so to speak, crosses beyond the whole of the class struggle - inevitably loses force, degenerates into allegory, becoming the object not of a live social intelligibility but of a philological comprehension."⁴¹

III .

The structuralist strand of cultural studies - as embodied in the work of Althusser, Levi-Strauss and early semiotics - made a decisive break with the terms of the base / superstructure metaphor. As Stuart Hall observes, structuralism ascribed to the domains hitherto defined as "superstructural" a specificity and effectivity, a constitutive primacy, which pushed them beyond the terms of reference of "base" and "superstructure".⁴² Being anti-reductionist and anti-economist in their very cast of mind, these structuralist theorists concentrated on the *internal* relations within signifying

⁴⁰ Other modern philosophers of language, like Jacques Derrida, also argue that meaning can never be finally settled. Words, they argue, are "multi-accentual", and always carry echoes of other meanings which they trigger off, despite one's best intentions to close them down. Meaning is therefore considered inherently unstable, supplemented by other meanings over which we have no control, and which arise and subvert our attempts to create fixed and stable worlds.

⁴¹ Voloshinov, V.N. (1973 : 23)

⁴² Hall, S. (1986 : 41)

practices by means of which the categories of meaning were produced, and sought to abandon the causal logic of determinacy in favour of a "...structuralist causality - a logic of arrangement, of internal relations, of articulation of parts within a structure".⁴³

However, in terms of coming to a thorough understanding of the nature of signifying processes and the modes and forms of ideological practices, structural-semiotics has several limitations. For one, structuralism could not entertain the notion that experience is the "lived" terrain where consciousness and conditions intersect and where meaning emerges. Structuralism, on the contrary, argues that individuals can only experience their lived conditions *in and through* the categories, classifications and frameworks of their particular cultures. Experience is therefore seen to be the "effect" of such categories, and the individual subject is conceived to be "spoken" by the internal structures of the language in which he (or she) finds himself (and which pre-exists his consciousness).

This conception of the language - and media texts - as preceding the consciousness of individuals ties in with another problematic aspect of the structuralist approach - this being the fact that its reading of ideology borders on functionalism. Structuralism identifies ideologies as the "cement" of the social formation, with the dominant ideology being imposed from "above" and unambiguously received by those "below".⁴⁴ As Stuart Hall observes, this makes it impossible either to conceive of ideologies which are not dominant or to entertain the notion of conflict in the cultural and political spheres. Hall does, however, concede that the work of Gramsci and Voloshinov do go somewhat towards correcting this structuralist tendency for

⁴³ Hall, S. (1986 : 41)

⁴⁴ Structural-functionalism began with Emile Durkheim, and his conception of social and social facts as almost physical objects that constrain individual behaviour. For Durkheim, society is a "force", a "being outside us" that "holds individuals under its control" and "forbids", "bonds", and "restrains". (1951 : 112, 209)

“accentual closure” by introducing into the domain of ideology and language the notion of a “struggle over meaning”⁴⁵

Building on this work, this paper agrees with John Fiske that critical practice must attempt to go beyond the limits both of the Frankfurt School and of the 1970’s ideological criticism, both of which model the viewer as powerless - in the one case in the face of the manipulations of the producers in the culture industry, and in the other in the face of the authority of the text to construct a reading position for its subjects.⁴⁶ As Fiske argues, unless we do, we will be unable to accommodate the possibility of social change, nor conceive of “the people” as anything other than “cultural dopes” who are powerless before the power of the media industry or media texts.

Hence this paper’s appeal for a more positive (reader-centred) critical approach to modern communication media. Such an approach both disputes the argument that mass communication media (such as television) are “ideologically closed”, and rejects claims that the dominant ideology is encoded into media texts in such a way as to constitute the audience as an Althusserian “subject-in-ideology”. Far from having an irresistible power to inform the sense-making processes of its subjects, such texts always display fissures and excesses which allow for polysemic readings, and thereby provide opportunities for resistance to the imposition of cultural meanings and the homogenization of culture.

This is not to assert that texts are anarchically open in such a way that *any* meaning can be derived from it. Indeed, as Fiske cautions, the multiple meanings of a given text are defined only by their relationships to

⁴⁵ Hall, S. (1992 : 78) While Gramsci admits that hegemony is never complete, and therefore suggests that the field of ideology is indeed a field of struggle, his argument appears somewhat self-verifying, and as Lemahieu (1988 : 15-6, fn.27) argues, appears to be little more than an elaboration of Marx’s “false consciousness” thesis.

⁴⁶ Fiske, J. (1986 : 394)

the dominant ideology as it is structured into that text. A text, he writes, can only appeal to a variety of audiences if there is common ideological frame that all can recognize and can use, even if many are opposed to it.⁴⁷ Rather, the idea of polysemy asserts that the dominant ideological meanings do not exhaust the semiotic potential of the text. As Stuart Hall observes, while the “. . . culture industries do have power constantly to rework and reshape what they represent ; and, by repetition and selection, to impose such definitions of ourselves as fit more easily into the descriptions of the dominant or preferred culture”, this does not mean that such definitions have the power to occupy our minds - as Hall puts it, “. . . they don't function on us as if we are blank screens”.⁴⁸

Hall's argument moves beyond the traditional understanding of the process of communication - this being communication as a circulation circuit or loop - towards a more structured conception of the process. For Hall, communication involves the articulation of linked but distinctive “moments” of production, circulation, distribution / consumption, and reproduction, with each “moment” retaining its distinctiveness and having its own modality, its own forms and conditions of existence.⁴⁹ Central to this model is the idea that no one moment can fully guarantee the next moment with which it is articulated, such that each stage of the process is capable of interrupting the “passage of forms” on which continuity the flow of effective production and reproduction of meaning depends. This is demonstrated by the fact that while the relatively autonomous moments of “encoding” and “decoding” are taken to be the “determinate moments”, they do not necessarily correspond. Both, importantly, have their own conditions of existence, such that while encoding can construct some limit or parameter within which decoding will operate, it can neither determine nor guarantee which decoding codes will be employed.

⁴⁷ Fiske, J. (1986 : 402)

⁴⁸ Hall, S. (1981 : 233), quoted in Fiske, J. (1986 : 400)

⁴⁹ Hall, S. (1993 : 91-2)

As Newcomb observes : "Makers and users, writers and readers, senders and receivers can do things with communication that are unintended, unplanned for, indeed, unwished for".⁵⁰ This much is evident from television, which, while a "... prolific producer of meaningfulness, which it seeks to discipline, by prodigious feats of ideological labour"⁵¹, such meaningfulness is literally out of control. This is the idea behind John Fiske's theory of semiotic excess, which proposes that "...once the ideological, hegemonic work has been performed, there is still excess meaning that escapes the control of the dominant and is thus available for the culturally subordinate to use for their own cultural-political interest."⁵²

Thus while Hall maintains that there are always "preferred meanings"⁵³ within a given text, the unresolved contradictions within the same text can be exploited by the reader or viewer to negotiate a meaning which is structurally similar to his or her own social relations and identity. "Preferred meanings" are therefore set against "other" discursive domains, arising from new, problematic or troubling social realities.

As Bruck and Raboy argue : "... people are still able to set their own experiences against the fabricated, spectacularized, and often quite fraudulent visions of reality that they regularly, and - often having little other choice - happily, 'consume' as media fare". Audiences, they continue, are not passive. Indeed, "... people find considerable enjoyment in their capacity and ability to resist the designs of media producers, come up with their own interpretations and, thus, to a certain extent, invent their own culture. That is to say, people are most able to find social and political

⁵⁰ Newcomb, J. (1984 : 38), cited Fiske, J. (1986 : 393)

⁵¹ Hartley, J. (1984 : 137)

⁵² Fiske, J. (1986 : 403)

⁵³ Stuart Hall's notion of "preferred meanings" extends beyond the sense made of texts to include an individual's sense of self, his or her sense of their social relations, and of the social structure as a whole. The whole social order is therefore embedded within these preferred meanings - as a set of meanings, practices and beliefs - which become naturalized as the society's "common sense", that is, as the everyday knowledge of social structures, of "how things work for all practical purposes", the rank order of power and interest and the structure of legitimations, limits and sanctions.

uses for the messages they are fed which need not correspond to the privileged meanings inscribed in the media text".⁵⁴

Hall forwards three possible decoding positions or "codes" employed to deal with textual contradictions :

1. The *dominant-hegemonic code*, which operates at the level of a meta-code and functions as a society's common sense in so far as it is generally referred to when confusion arises.
2. The *negotiated code* which, through a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements, abstractly acknowledges the legitimacy of hegemonic definitions to make significations, while at the same time, at a more situated level, makes its own ground rules. In other words, this code operates with exceptions to the rule : dominant definitions are granted a privileged position, while the right to make a more "negotiated" application to "local conditions" is reserved.
3. The *oppositional code* involves decoding a message in a globally contrary way to the dominant code. Based on a perfect understanding of the literal and connotative inflection of discourse, the oppositional position detotalizes the preferred message, and retotalizes it within an alternative framework or reference.

Referring to the appeal made above for a more positive (reader-centred) critical approach to the media - that is, one which attempts to resist the centralization of meaning - we can now argue that such an approach involves a strategy for recognizing the semiotic excess of a text (that is, those potential meanings that escape the control of the producers of the dominant culture). As John Fiske presents it, this will enable us to "... identify where and how members of subordinate subcultures can use these semiotic opportunities to generate meaning for *themselves*, meanings that relate to their own cultural experiences and

⁵⁴ Bruck, P.A. & Raboy, M. (1989 : 13)

positions, meanings that serve their interests and not those of cultural domination.”⁵⁵

These alternative cultural-political interests are what underpin Okar Negt’s “emancipatory communication”, which seeks to create and reproduce “. . . the objective conditions under which the human being can become more of a subject and can build more autonomous and more comprehensive relationships to reality”.⁵⁶ However, while the “alternative media” have, as Bruck and Raboy observe, certainly contributed to the availability of “counter-information”⁵⁷, and thus to the general alternative political culture, they have “. . . not appreciably countered the institutional impact of established mass media on the mainstream of society, let alone suggested viable alternative structures for mainstream media”.⁵⁸ As they argue, very often the alternative media initiatives that have taken over pockets of public space (and as such represent important siezures of communicative power), have unfortunately degenerated into neo-professional self-interest or technological fetishism and their initial purposes are forgotten. At best, they continue, the more politically well-intentioned tend eventually to founder on the “iceberg of economic necessity”.⁵⁹

Clearly, the goal of enhancing democratic social life through the use of communication - by diversifying social, cultural and political agency, promoting the expressive possibilities and competences of individuals, and strengthening the power of individuals to manage their own lives within the conditions of society and history - requires a more comprehensive understanding of the media environment. As Bruck and Raboy maintain, it

⁵⁵ Fiske, J. (1986 : 405)

⁵⁶ Negt, O. (1978)

⁵⁷ By “counter-information, Bruck, P.A. and Raboy, M. (1987 : 13) refer to “. . . information about subjects the media are not ready to take seriously, unorthodox interpretations and, possibly most important, fair portrayals of the complex issues affecting the internal lives of social movements”.

⁵⁸ Bruck, P.A. & Raboy, M. (1989 : 12)

⁵⁹ Bruck, P.A. & Raboy, M. (1989 : 12)

is insufficient to be content with analysing the meaning possibilities provided by polysemic texts, or even idolizing some oppositional readings or appropriations of commercial cultural products by subcultural groups.⁶⁰ What is needed over and above an understanding of the symbolic processes of mass communication, is an ongoing critical analysis of the *industrial* processes underlying this field of human activity.

In other words, if we are to arrive at a credible understanding of the signifying practices and processes underlying contemporary social and cultural practices, we need to examine not only individuals' everyday understandings and their routine practices of reception and appropriation, but also the socio-historical conditions within which these practices of understanding take place. We need, in other words, to understand the *terrain* of situated symbolic forms, and the social and economic power relations which such forms serve to mediate. The political environment has much information to communicate, and individuals are increasingly gaining access to communicate with one another through means which by-pass dominant channels. Yet for such ideas and actions to be at all effective, some understanding is required of just what the inhabited communication systems really are, how they work, and how they are changing.

Moreover, a critical media practice needs to consider the political economy in which communication systems are embedded, and in which symbolic forms are employed and take hold as ideology. For while the mass media can no longer be seen as analogous to a hypodermic needle, injecting narcotic pollutants into a body politic with no powers of resistance, there are nevertheless certain contextual constraints and parameters on human thought and action issuing from the structure of the broader set of social relations and institutions. While these constraint do not imply the absence of choice, they do provide a framework for the range of possible meanings. It is to this constraining framework that we must now turn.

⁶⁰ Bruck, P.A. & Raboy, M. (1989 : 13)

6.

**“Information and the construction of meaning in the new
electronic media environment , as conditioned
by the political economy of late capitalism”**

Mounting empirical evidence on the critical faculties and sensibilities of the “mass audience” suggests that audiences are able to decode media content and use and interpret messages in a myriad ways.¹ Moreover, given certain institutional, technological and textual changes in the arrangement of the contemporary electronic mediascape, this struggle over meaning seems set to become even more dynamic and contested as the multicontextual conditions of audience practices and experiences undergo dramatic transformations.² New technologies and new forms of television present fundamentally different television contexts in which audiences are offered more control over their media environment, potentially allowing the emergence of a more active and discriminating audience which engages in a far wider range of activities than just sitting stupefied before the spectacle of MTV or children’s cartoons.³

Television audiences, in other words, can no longer be seen as a mass or a single market collectively engaged and involved in a well-defined act of viewing a common text. Rather, as Ang points out, the audience has become “fragmented, individualized, dispersed”, while the media themselves “. . . are increasingly everywhere, but not everywhere in the

¹ For an interesting ethnographic study on the strategic use of ideology-critique by viewers “out there”, see Ien Ang’s Watching Dallas : Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination, (London : Methuen)

² The eclipse of national public service broadcasting systems, the worldwide ascendancy of a multiplicity of transnational, commercially organized satellite channels, the proliferation of local and regional channels, and the ever abundant availability of VCR’s and other television-related technologies are just some of the developments throwing traditional modes of reception and consumption into disarray.

³ Best, S. & Kellner, D., (1987 : 111)

same way.”⁴ The result, she continues, is that it has become “. . . impossible to list *a priori* which possible meanings and characteristics each category acquires in any specific situation in which people engage in television consumption. As a result of this contingency of meaning, the range of potential variety in audience practices and experiences becomes exponentially multiplied, indefinite if not infinite.”⁵

However, as Ang cautions, “. . . revalidating the popular alone - by pointing to the empirical fact that audiences are active meaning producers and imaginative pleasure seekers - can become a banal form of cultural critique if the popular itself is not seen in a thoroughly social and political context.”⁶ It is not enough to simply analyse the internal structural features and systemic elements of symbolic forms; as J.B.Thompson observes, the contextual aspect has to be taken into account. The production of meaning, he argues, requires an analysis of the social contexts, institutions and process within which symbolic forms are produced, transmitted and received, as well as an analysis of the relations of power, forms of authority, kinds of resources and other characteristics of these contexts.⁷

Whatever kinds of personal values, lifestyles and world views do emerge in the contemporary media environment result not only from the active (semiotic) engagement of (diverse) audiences with such (polysemic) media, but also from the context of competing social forces that determine or structure the dispositions and trajectories of the media themselves. That is to say, the interplay of social, political and economic forces within wider structures of power decisively shapes not only the character of media organizations, but also the evolution of technologies and the symbolic content they transmit.⁸ A populist discourse which celebrates the audience's vitality and independence may therefore sound wonderfully

⁴ Ang, I., (1996 : 67, 79)

⁵ Ang, I., (1996 : 70)

⁶ Ang, I., (1996 : 139)

⁷ Thompson, J.B., (1990 : 145)

⁸ Curran, J., Smith, A. & Wingate, P., (1987 : 1)

democratic, but, as Ang points out, it tends to downplay the realities of oppression.⁹

"Active" audiences, it must be noted, are not "powerful" audiences, for the ability to decode media content and to appropriate and transform meaning to one's own end is not in itself a manifestation of political power in any specific or relevant sense - that is, in the sense of "taking control" at an enduring structural or institutional level.¹⁰ As Jensen points out, "[the] polysemy of media texts is only a political potential."¹¹ While the social world is open, dynamic, and plural, and the blunt, obvious material realities of historical facts and individual existence are those of densely complex texts and social practices, this is not in itself evidence of struggle in the face of objectified social norms. Following Streeter, polysemy is a "given", the starting point from which all else is derived, but ". . . various and 'contradictory' interpretations of television texts are not in themselves evidence of political or cultural opposition".¹²

For opposition at the textual level to be anything more than a mere negotiation of meaning in the relatively private context of media reception, a more comprehensive understanding is needed of the determined situation in which historical instances of television consumption takes place. For while it is no doubt true that intelligent, reflective human beings actively produce a social world through the construction and exchange of meaning - the superstructures are not a mere "reflex" of the base - it is also true that this process is firmly situated within a historically specific socio-economic reality.

⁹ Ang, I., (1996 : 139)

¹⁰ The "appropriative power" of the audience, according to John Fiske, is "... the power not to change or overturn imposed structures, but to negotiate the potentially oppressive effects of those structures where they cannot be overthrown, where they have to be lived with", [Power Plays / Power Works, (1993), quoted in Ang, I., (1996 : 8)]

¹¹ Jensen, K.B., (1990 : 74)

¹² Streeter, T., (1989 : 99)

Society precedes the mass media as a generator of meaning. That is to say, meaning flows from the discourses, practices, and social institutions of everyday life which the media reflect (or refract) and address. However, the reception of the messages and images of mass communication has become the cultural practice most widely engaged in by the contemporary general public. The media are peoples' constant "context of reference", and establish their collective criteria for understanding the socio-political environment. The media do not, however, mould peoples' perceptual attitudes by issuing some binding ideological prescriptions on specific topics. Rather, they "... concentrate public attention on some topics, while diminishing the importance of others or even wholly excluding them from the cognitive horizon." In doing so, the media, "... play a decisive part in selecting what the public perceives as relevant because, by virtue of being the most effective modulators of public attention, they have the function of establishing and distributing what may well be called 'attention values'."¹³

So pronounced has the mediatization of the social world become that Bruck and Raboy go so far as to assert that the communicative practices of everyday life (the micro units of social existence) have become so inextricably linked to the structure and organization of the communication order (the macro unit of social systems), that it is becoming increasingly difficult to understand the relationships between different social groups unless they are qualified by their relative position in the communicational environment.¹⁴ Indeed, Lash and Urry contend that contemporary culture has, through "... a combination of often figural, anti-auratic, electronic and spectacular symbols" had the effect of "... disintegrating older modes of individual and collective identity and, at times, reconstituting new ones and leading ineluctably to a twenty-first century experience in which a social structure based on a massive industrial core working class, huge industrial

¹³ Zolo, D., (1992 : 156, 160)

¹⁴ Bruck, P.A. & Raboy, M., (1989 : 7)

cities, the capital-labour relationship structuring society, a minor and insignificant service class, has all been left far behind.”¹⁵ Electronic culture, in other words, has radically re-ordered the deep-structure of viewer’s orientation to the world. Categories of time and place are being restructured; social situations, roles and behaviours are being redefined; the barriers that formerly separated the public from the private have been penetrated; and new group identities and new modes of socialization and forms of sociability are in the process of formation. Indicative of this are the merging of masculine and feminine identities, the blurring of the distinction between childhood and adulthood, and undermining traditional concepts of hierarchy and authority.¹⁶ In other words, electronically mediated communication has profoundly altered the way we know, interact and construct reality.

However, while in the basic sense of exposure, mass communication initiates “. . . a process of interpreting and enacting multiple potential meanings”, audiences do not produce a unified meaning through a single act of reception.¹⁷ As Hartley puts it, “. . . decoding is not . . . a simple individual act, but one in which socially-structured contexts will be manifested.”¹⁸ Audiences therefore reactivate meanings deriving from the mass media in multiple social contexts of action. Television, for example, is a consumer product located largely in the family environment, such that its meanings are likely to be realized according to the immediate family viewing structure.¹⁹

The social production of meaning is in other words dependent in the first instance upon available technological resources (scribal, print or audiovisual technologies prepare new forms of social interaction, while

¹⁵ Lash, S., & Urry, J., (1987 : 312)

¹⁶ For comprehensive accounts of the impact of electronic media on social identity and behaviour, see Meyrowitz (1985) and Postman (1982).

¹⁷ Jensen, K.B., (1995 : 62)

¹⁸ Hartley, J., (1984 : 151)

¹⁹ Hartley, J., (1984 : 151)

ruling out others) ; the economic base of mass communication (which shapes the diversity and specific historical form of the mass media) ; and the organizational level of development (which affects concrete discourses and practices of individual mass media, and hence their place in the cultural domain as a whole").²⁰

A political economy of the media therefore seeks to come to terms with the wider context within which media content is produced and received, and in which meanings are appropriated, transformed and possibly employed in a politically relevant sense. It argues that even though the social production of meaning can be seen as a process in which the prevailing definition of reality may be challenged and revised, the outcome of that process is overdetermined by the historical and institutional frameworks of communication. Thus, while the political economy approach acknowledges the centrality of mediated forms of communication to social life and its analysis, it is particularly concerned with the notion that such mediated forms involve the use of scarce material resources and the mobilization of competencies and dispositions which are themselves in important ways determined by access to scarce resources.²¹

As Garnham sees it, the political economy of mass communication needs to be elaborated within the wider framework of an analysis of the historically specific capitalist mode of production. For, as he argues, the underlying dynamics of development in the cultural sphere in general - in which much of what is produced and consumed is provided by profit-seeking institutions - make it imperative to analyse the mass media in terms of the logic of generalized commodity production.²² The mass media, Garnham claims, have both a direct economic role in the cultural sphere as creators of surplus value through commodity production and exchange, and an indirect role, through advertising, in the creation of surplus value within

²⁰ Jensen, K.B., (1995 : 61)

²¹ Garnham, N., (1990 : 9)

²² Garnham, N., (1986b : 31)

other sectors of commodity production.²³ Such institutions must therefore be conceived first and foremost as economic entities.²⁴ Contemporary cultural institutions may be distinguishable from each other through their various relationships to the imperatives of state and commerce, but as Bruck and Raboy point out, they all nevertheless share the main operating logic.²⁵ "Not human justice and growth broadly and humanely conceived, but economic profit and control come to dictate the structures and practices of oligopolistic super media decision-making".²⁶ Thus, in terms of the arrival of new computer-communication technologies for instance, such issues as the significance of market principles, strategies of transnational corporations, the current crisis and recession within which new media technologies are being developed, as well as the industrialization of culture and the colonization of leisure through the logic of commodification, need to be addressed.

Identities and connectedness may well evolve through communicative interactions, but these interactions are themselves connected with structures of power. The media, in other words, are an important cultural battleground, but one in which contestation of the underlying ideological formations of the dominant social discourses is becoming increasingly circumscribed by the corporate appropriation and transformation of social and cultural materials. For to the extent that (a). access to both the channels and means of communication becomes prohibitively dependent on the mobilization of scarce material resources, and (b). that the corporate market's domination of sites of cultural production enables it to impose its conditions and principles on all such cultural production, so the potential

²³ Garnham, N., (1986b : 6)

²⁴ As David Lyon (1988 : 129) argues, audience choice between the channels and commodities of the 'electronic culture' is increasingly circumscribed by commercial criteria. "On the one hand, this means that the large corporate interests which control the field of publishing, broadcasting and software (from films to games) will make their decisions about content according to profitability rather than say, the ethic of [public service broadcasting]. On the other hand, ability to pay will determine more and more who has access to what kinds of information and cultural product."

²⁵ Bruck, P.A. & Raboy, M., (1989 : 3)

²⁶ Real, M., (1989 : 255)

for the mass media to function as a democratic public sphere is undermined.²⁷ That is to say, in a media context characterized by processes of privatization, conglomeration, deregulation and transnationalization, and the resulting commercialization and depoliticization of public information, the possibility for the realization of democratic principles through social communication is becoming less likely.

Set against these "anti-democratic" trends are technological developments opening up relatively independent media institutions and social spaces capable of generating and enlivening democratic action alternatives. As Bruck and Raboy observe, new forms of association are evolving in the media environment which, by connecting the individual to the surrounding mediascape - and thereby enlarging access to the products of mass culture - can serve as productive intermediaries for meaning creation.²⁸ New, "de-massified" computer-mediated communication technologies - whether in the form of the Internet, VCR's, or alternative TV, potentially extend "...the right to acquire information into the right to produce one's own."²⁹ As such, they could provide radical subcultures and groups with the means for independent cultural production and expression, and marginal and oppositional voices with an opening to resist the corporate domination and homogenization of culture, and to thereby contest the mainstream's view of the world, its values and its lifestyles.

²⁷

Indeed, markets themselves are no longer strictly economic entities. As Bruck and Raboy (1989 : 5) observe, "... they are also sites of signification, or social and cultural entities, which alter the ideas that people have about material things and social relations, reassign meanings, produce value, and coordinate informationally complex social activities of vast populations. Their semiotic effect exceeds what one would traditionally refer to as the ideological ; rather, they counter traditional ideological apparatuses such as religion, education, or 'high art'."

²⁸

Bruck, P.A. & Raboy, M., (1989 : 6)

²⁹

Bruck, P.A. & Raboy, M., (1989 : 10)

II.

This study's concern to demonstrate the democratic potential of new information and communication technologies is wary of the popular tendency to see such media as some source of perpetual and partially inexplicable power. Communications media are not autonomous institutions, and it is unacceptable to see them as free-floating, independent satellites. Social power never lies with the media themselves, but rather with those who control its critical resources, and thereby exercise considerable control over content through control over access to the raw material which is news. As Bruck and Raboy point out, whatever does not get into the evening news is as important as what does, for the denial of access to sources, viewpoints or perspectives limits the polysemic range.³⁰ This is as true of the new "de-massified" media as it is of mass media such as newspapers, television and cinema.

The development of new and potentially alternative information and communication technologies must therefore be seen in context of another trend of the so-called "Information Society" - that is, in terms of a shift in the balance in the cultural sector between market and public service decisively in favour of the former, and a shift in the dominant definition of public information ". . . from that of a public good to that of a privately appropriated commodity".³¹

As Nicholas Garnham presents it, the market is reinforced as the preferred mode for the allocation of cultural resources through a number of developments :

- by a focus on the TV set as the locus for an increasingly privatized, domestic mode of consumption ;

³⁰ Bruck, P.A. & Raboy, M., (1989 : 13)
³¹ Garnham, N., (1990 : 105).

- by the creation of a two-tier market divided between the information-rich (provided with high-cost specialized information and cultural services³²), and the information-poor (provided with increasingly homogenized entertainment services on a mass scale³³) ; and
- by a shift from largely national to international markets in the informational and cultural spheres.³⁴

Symptoms of this shift are the expansion of the new TV delivery services, such as video cassettes, cable and direct-broadcasting satellites under market control and on an international scale ; the progressive deregulation and privatization of national telecommunication monopolies ; the increased penetration of sponsorship into the financing of both leisure and culture (eg. sports and the arts) ; the move of education and research institutions, such as universities, toward the private sector under pressure of public spending cuts ; and the growing tendency to make profitability the criteria for the provision of public information, with library services increasingly moving away from the principle of free and open access to public libraries towards access to proprietary databases on a payment-by-use basis.³⁵

Questions of ownership and control of the media are obviously going to be important variables in explaining the incompatibility between the commercial and political functions of the media. Indeed, this is the

³² Certain types of information are restricted to the corporate and state sectors that can afford the multi-million dollar hardware and software, the expensive on-line connections, and the thousand dollar subscription fees to international data networks.

³³ Here Garnham is referring to the so-called "garbage" information supplied to the "general public" via enhanced television - the round of movies, sex and sport "on the cable" ; the intensified diet of "entertainment" ; and the mindless videogames like Frogger and Pacman.

³⁴ Of interest here are the emergence of so-called "information factories" constructed by the likes of Reuters, Datastream and ITT ; on-line services of mainly financial, but also economic and political nature ; and global, decentred corporations such as Bertelsmann, Murdoch, Berlusconi and Time Warner, which combine and intergrate diverse media products (film, television, press and publishing) into overarching communications empires.

³⁵ Garnham, N., (1990 : 104-5)

theoretical path chosen by most theorists critical of the mass communications sector, especially those within the Marxist tradition. However, as Garnham argues, this incompatibility is even more a question of "... the value system and set of social relations within which commercial operations must operate and which they serve to reinforce. For it is these which are inimicable, not just to one political group or another, but to the very process of democratic politics itself. Political communication is forced to channel itself via commercial media."³⁶

The press and public service broadcasting have to compete for audiences with the commercial media and on its dominant terms ; the result is the transformation of public communication (as a way of sharing life) into the politics of consumerism.³⁷ In this discursive mode, politicians appeal to voters "... not as rational beings concerned for the public good, but in the mode of advertising, as creatures of passing and largely irrational appetite, whose self-interest they must purchase. Such a politics is forced to take on the terms of address of the media it uses and to address its readers, viewers and listeners within the set of social relations that those media have created for other purposes. Thus the citizen is addressed as a private individual rather than as a member of the public, within a privatized domestic sphere rather than within public life."³⁸

³⁶ Garnham, N., (1990 : 111)
The underlying logic of the commercial media is the commodification of public information which, as Bruck and Raboy (1989 : 6) argue, "... detaches communication from concrete historical contexts of action, practical reasoning, or moral judgements. It substitutes temporary titillation, sensual stimulation, and intellectual fascination ; it operates entirely in the present and seeks nothing more than the attention of the moment".

³⁷ Consumerism is a distinctly modern phenomenon, resulting as it did, in part, from the modern forms of social life in the metropolis and the city - ways of life described by Baudelaire as "ephemeral", "fugitive", and "contingent". In the context of this internally diverse, bustling and anonymous social world, individuals embraced consumerism as a way of preventing their autonomy being levelled down and worn out by overwhelming social forces. Consumerism, then, emerges as a mode of differentiation in a highly objectified culture, with consumed goods and experiences being signifiers of a particular style of life. Even today, as David Harvey (1989 : 26) observes, the "... only outlet ... is to cultivate a sham individualism through the pursuit of signs of status, fashion or marks of individual eccentricity."

³⁸ Garnham, N., (1990 : 111)

New technologies are neither developed nor employed in a social, political and economic vacuum, nor will they in themselves bring about a new society. It is therefore imperative that a realistic theoretical approach be adopted to balance their potential with the existing social, political and economic arrangements in which they are developing. This would involve their "demythologization" through a critical understanding of just what is being discussed and subsumed under the aura of the glib term "information society".³⁹ As David Lyon observes, there exists the danger of using the information society concept uncritically, and so disguising or glossing over the reality of domination by powerful interests.⁴⁰ The rhetoric of the electronic sublime must therefore be demystified, for as Carey and Quirk argue, the arrival of electronic means of communication heralds "neither the arrival of apocalypse nor the dispensation of grace".⁴¹ As we demythologize, they continue, ". . . we might also begin to dismantle the fetishes of communication for the sake of communication, and decentralization *without reference to content or context*."⁴² In other words, we must not allow our fascination with new technologies to either blind us to the real political factors of class, status and power, or to lead us to believe that such underlying factors have been absorbed and transformed by technique and its extraordinary apparatus.

III.

In addressing the potential of new technologies, it must be recognized that technology does not arrive by itself, but results from human choices, economic pressures and political ideologies. It may seem, as Ellul has

³⁹ It is only by doing this, Meeham (1988 : 168) argues, that the deluge of fanciful futuristic figments such as the electronic cottage, computer democracy, the paperless office, and the symbolic figure of the leisured, casually dressed, computer-literate manipulator of digital knowledge can be placed in the proper perspective. Lyon, D., (1988 : 149)

⁴⁰ Carey, J. & Quirk, J. (1970 : 423)

⁴¹ Carey, J. & Quirk, J. (1970 : 423)

⁴² Carey, J. & Quirk, J. (1970 : 423)

persuasively argued, that technology has a self-perpetuating and self-augmenting character, but clearly economic factors interfere with this "breeding" process.⁴³ Technological development, in other words, is embedded within the structures of industry, politics and consumption, and proceeds according to which areas are likely to *pay*.⁴⁴

This structure, however, is not a simple, undifferentiated, universal, and unified system of relationships, and as Meehan points out, methodologically, the political economy of information cannot be explored via a single level of analysis.⁴⁵ Ultimately, the capacity to control communication *is* a manifestation of political power. In this sense, the culture industries do function as a major link in the restructuring of world capital and power alignments. However, as Meehan continues, military and transnational applications of information and communication technologies must not be conflated with personal purchases of home appliances and entertainment services, and the activities and relationships between the military and the handful of transnational corporations that own the invention factories (such as At & T and IBM) must be explored in their own terms.⁴⁶ The same is true for the relationships between transnational corporations, other powerful corporations and governmental entities.⁴⁷

⁴³ This is admittedly a rather simplistic interpretation of Ellul's argument. His term "*la technique*", for instance, embraces far more than mere machines or artifacts, and includes any way of doing things for a purpose. For a more in-depth discussion of the logic of technological progress, see Ellul, J., (1964)

⁴⁴ As Meehan (1988 : 168) observes, the underlying logic connecting the development of new technologies with information or entertainment production is : first, that only technologies in the direct interests of corporations will be made available to the public ; second, elaborate capabilities will be tailored to suit particular corporate interests, and general access to them will be limited by commercial interest ; and finally, that the content available, whether elaborate or simple, will be limited by the content-producer's ability to cycle that information or entertainment over as many other outlets as possible.

⁴⁵ Meehan, E.R., (1988 : 167). Similarly, Lyon (1988 : 9) compares the ambitious task of drawing together in one place all the strands of "new technology and human life" to struggling to hold down an over-eager hot-air balloon".

⁴⁶ For instance, by addressing the connections between military demand, appropriation of public funds to transnational corporations for technological development, and the dynamics of imperialism in a world capitalist system.

⁴⁷ Issues of concern at this analytical level include the relationship between media corporations and cultural imperialism, and governmental intervention to protect corporate interests and information flows.

The analytical concern of this study is the relationship between media corporations and the people who purchase the services and technologies that have been innovated down through other levels. For as Meehan proposes, it is by exploring the cultural and ideological uses of such technologies (rather than their military or commercial deployment) that critical research can connect and validate people's experiences, and apply itself to local situations where progressive intervention may seem more possible to people.⁴⁸ This is a crucial level of analysis, she maintains, because ". . . because the dominant ideology often manipulates promises of diversity at this level . . . in order to secure support for policies serving the vested interests of particular corporations or the military-industrial complex. By changing the terms of public discourse from consumer choice to corporate imperative, one reveals how capitalism systematically limits and slants the claims, images, and outlets available to people despite the technological potential for diversity."⁴⁹

It is at this third tier of technological development, then, between media corporations and individuals / groups, that new communications and information media could potentially be employed as part of a radical cultural politics that aims at a counter-hegemony to the hegemony of the mainstream.⁵⁰ For while capital and the state may remain the major stakeholders in the communication and information sector, their dominant use of new technologies for purposes of profitability and social control does not preclude the possibilities for alternative forms of social interaction nor the use of such technologies against the interests of the dominant elites.

As Luke argues : "While the material technologies of community cable television, citizen band radio, home videotapes, audiocassettes, low power / local-broadcast radio or television, photocopying, mainframe computer

⁴⁸ Meehan, E.R., (1988 : 168)

⁴⁹ Meehan, E.R., (1988 : 168)

⁵⁰ Best, S. & Kellner, D., (1987 : 111)

networks, and microcomputers are still produced in the existing corporate economy, not all of their potential applications have been integrated completely into the conventional products cycles of the mass market. Their full aesthetic, commercial and political potentials, then, are still being explored. Such new media could provide crucial sites for a strategy of contestation : organizing progressive personal and social change by defining new cultural categories of media reception, generating alternative codes of interpretation, or subverting the present modes of communication from within.”⁵¹

What Luke is alluding to is what Umberto Eco dubs “semiological guerilla warfare”.⁵² Basing his argument on the idea that “[The] battle for the survival of man as a responsible being in the Communications Era is not to be won where the communication originates, but where it arrives”, Eco proposes the construction of systems of complementary communication which groups of “communications guerillas” can exploit to communicate a series of options on different media “to every human group”⁵³. This network, he proposes, would allow individuals “. . . to discuss the arriving message in the light of the codes at the destination, comparing them with the codes at the source.”⁵⁴ So employed, the media would facilitate “. . . the constant correction of perspectives, the checking of codes, the ever renewed interpretation of mass messages”, and so restore a critical dimension to passive reception (ie. a return to individual responsibility).⁵⁵

Similarly with Luke’s alternative media practice, which calls for the use of new technologies to deconstruct the entire means of symbolic management and the administrative programming which prevent people from determining their own forms of everyday life. The new media, Luke argues, can be used to extend critiques of ideology, critical discourses, and counter-

⁵¹ Luke, T., (1989b : 241)

⁵² Eco, U., (1987 : 135)

⁵³ Eco, U., (1987 : 142)

⁵⁴ Eco, U., (1976 : 142)

⁵⁵ Eco, U., (1976 : 144)

image production, all of which could turn the corporate codes of media-borne ideology against themselves. As he puts it, ". . . with their potential for more local control, popular access, community programming, user-generated content, more critical styles of discourse, narrow image codes, and immediate use value in their operation, the alternative media today present some real possibilities for developing even more sophisticated, critical countercultures."⁵⁶

While many people already understand how the codes of mainstream media work, and at some point think critically about their lives and frequently disengage from the collaborative imperatives of mass media market building and maintenance, the real value of new communication media is that they ". . . put ordinary people behind the camera, microphone, or keypad to unravel these codes and produce the cultural foundations for their own enlightenment and emancipation."⁵⁷ The political effects of this capacity are bound to be radically different from those of mainstream mass communication, characterized as the latter is by its assymetric and non-interactive nature.

By tacitly filtering the daily order of public attention, the structures and practices of mass political communication are linked with tendencies towards conformity, apathy and political "silence".⁵⁸ Through its domination of public consciousness and its expression as public opinion, the mass media such as television are a critical component in a complex process which generates alienation, mistrust and disengagement from the political process. New "alternative" communications media, on the other hand, not only enable individuals to conceive and formulate themes for inclusion on the political agenda, but also to actually express these themes to appropriate audiences.⁵⁹ Thus, following Luke's argument, while the

⁵⁶ Luke, T., (1989b : 245-6)

⁵⁷ Luke, T., (1989b : 246)

⁵⁸ Zolo, D., (1992 : 168)

⁵⁹ The now famous example of this is that of the Ayatollah Khomeini who, while exiled in Paris in the 1970's, prior to the Iranian revolution, sent his messages

electronic media may well erode the walls of personal autonomy and contextual rationality in everyday life, alternative uses of the new communications technologies could undermine the ideology of market imperatives and corporate profit targets by projecting a more “. . . educative, critical space which is accessible, immediate, broadgauged, and multipurposed.”⁶⁰

While many alternative uses of new communications technology may not succeed in this endeavour and may, as Luke concedes, turn out to be “. . . as mean-spirited, ineffectual, or just plain stupid as . . . mainstream media”⁶¹, such media do represent the opportunity for making a new beginning, and might well “. . . provide an initial beachhead to reclaim everyday cultural reproduction from market-based dictates.”⁶² As Luke puts it : “The logic of commodification would not necessarily be contained immediately, and it might simply coopt these efforts to serve some of its own unfulfilled purposed. Still, firebreaks against its further expansion also might be built by digging into some of the new, expanded sites for popular discussion afforded by such counter-systemic strategies.”⁶³

through telephone and tapes to Iran, where they were copied by the thousands on cassette tapes and distributed to the masses through the informal and traditional communication network. [See Hamid Mowlana, (1979 : 111)]

⁶⁰ Luke, T., (1989b : 247)

⁶¹ Such experiments in the politics of image could, as Luke (1989b : 256) cautions, simply “. . . devolve into eco-activist soap operas, feminist quiz shows, socialist sitcoms, or no-nuke talk shows.”

⁶² Luke, T., (1989b : 249)

⁶³ Luke, T., (1989b : 249)

Conclusion

This study has sought to demonstrate the value and promise of working towards an understanding of the operations of ideology and power in late capitalist societies. Contrary to the bleak picture painted by the Frankfurt School theorists¹ and certain brands of postmodernism, it has maintained throughout that the project of human emancipation remains both propitious and viable. Furthermore, the study anticipates a future partially constituted by motivated cultural producers upholding a culture of critical discourse in which intellectual criticism and rational public debate address themselves to matters of contemporary general interest. History is therefore not seen to be a process involving the ineluctable destruction of progressive or utopian energies, and the notion that public life has been irreparably degraded through media-induced cynicism, narcissism and apathy has been firmly rejected.

Taking as its starting point the centrality of public communication to democratic practice, this study set out to critically interrogate and reconstruct Jurgen Habermas's notion of the public sphere to suit the conditions and dynamics of signifying practices in a changing media environment. Habermas's theory embraces the notion of the public sphere as both an arena comprising the major political and cultural institutions of the social system (the State, the economy and the private realm) as well as the Fourth Estate, *and* as a device which mediates relations between the State and individuals by setting the terms of cooperation through rational democratic communication. While Habermas's own argument, as set out in The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, is based on an

¹ This claim, of course, is more applicable to the School's founding fathers - Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse - than it is to either Habermas or the third generation theorists (those writing in the journal Telos, such as Luke, Piccone, Zipes, and Jacoby) - who, while cautious of millerian fantasies of total redemption through political action, do attempt to prefigure possible responses to decreasing democracy, growing systemic irrationality and spreading destruction.

historically- and class-specific conception of public communication, the model itself - and the normative ideals it encapsulates - is still taken to have a certain efficacy for democratic theory. For seen as a semiotic, discursive fact, the public sphere serves as a foundation for understanding the social relationship between meaning and action.² It does so by pointing to the fact that it is in the interstice between the linguistic and non-linguistic elements of social existence that meaning is constructed.

The relationship between human consciousness, objective reality, and representational systems such as language in the construction of meaning was then pursued at a deeper hermeneutic level. This involved moving beyond the classical Marxist conception of ideology, and its economistic and overly reductionist approach to the base / superstructure relationship. Themes central to structural Marxism were addressed, such as Althusser's notion of ideological state apparatuses, and Gramsci's theory of hegemony. These, it was argued, can be seen as a theoretical conduit to the structuralist and semiotic approaches to the signifying practices of language. While not without methodological flaws and theoretical problems, these approaches address the social production of meaning in terms of moments of "articulation", and thereby make a decisive break with economic "determination in the last instance" (Althusser). By widening the meaning of language so as to connect linguistic forms with the study of social structures, processes and behaviour, this textualist approach to cultural forms effectively demonstrates the relative autonomy and specificity of symbolic structures and processes of meaning production.

The mass media environment is thus exposed as being eminently open to critique. Far from being homogenous, one-dimensional, flat, superficial, and unreal, this environment is seen to be riven with contradiction, conflict, heterogeneity, rough edges and oppositional voices. The social reality of a splintered and polysemic cultural world, and of

² Jensen, K.B. (1995 : 60)

recalcitrant audiences capable of responding to media texts primarily on the basis of the discourses they bring to their consumption, make it less possible to see the culture industry as an instrument of ideological conformity and cultural homogenization. Increasingly, then, the site of media reception is a theatre for social conflict and an instrument of cultural diversity. This is increasingly the case as corporate interests diversify media markets in pursuit of profitability, and as they target new audiences as market niches for ideology and commodities.

However, this study also recognizes the dangers in both romanticizing the audience as active meaning makers, and taking the inherent polysemy of media texts to be an indication of actual oppositional political action. To this end a brief investigation of the political economy of mass communications in late capitalist societies was undertaken to demonstrate the way in which this institutional context constrains, or limits the social production of meaning. The informationalization of society and the industrialization of culture through the depoliticizing processes of commercialization and commodification are seen as having a profoundly negative effect on the character and quality of discursive relations appropriate to healthy and substantial democratic practice.

Yet even in a political climate marked by anti-democratic trends such as the privatization of information resources and the centralization of meaning, this paper concludes by suggesting that there nevertheless exists some potential for developing more vibrant and effective counter-knowledges that can engage and criticize the dominant discourses of power and their implicit agendas. While new communication technologies and digital information systems are being systematically used in ways contrary to real human needs and desires³, their potential value for "semiological guerilla tactics" has not yet been fully realized. These new technologies,

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An example of this is the creation of "transactional information", generated every time we use electronic terminals, making it possible to pinpoint the location of an individual at a particular moment, indicate his daily patterns of work, sleep and

this study contends, not only enable counter-cultural groups and movements to cultivate separate identities in a context largely free from the “normalizing gaze” of the mainstream media, but they also facilitate the circulation of counter-hegemonic meanings to individuals and social groups whose “resistance” to the ideological encodings of media messages would otherwise be restricted to the relatively isolated realm of privatized appropriation. In other words, technological transformations in the informational and communications sectors of society pose fundamental questions about how we understand the media, and by extension, how we understand the public sphere.

By promoting new forms of political interaction, and encouraging open and reasoned dialogue and the sharing of information, these technologies may well enable diverse groups to reach wider agreements on how to survive as individuals and how to steer social development in a more humane, ethical and self-reliant direction. As Dizard maintains, we need to use new communication and information technologies to increase human understanding. Instead of seeing such technologies as improved means of storing and distributing information, we must recognize that their greatest value may be as “. . . satellites of consciousness, monitoring and identifying social needs in much the same way as a remote-sensing satellite in space monitors earth’s environmental conditions”.⁴

leisure, and even suggest his state of mind. The result is a huge electronic grid constantly and routinely subjecting individuals to monitor and study, burrowing into their psyches as unsuspecting consumers and citizens. Being largely inaccessible to public scrutiny, these huge databases pose fundamental questions for civil liberties.

⁴ Dizard, W.P. Jr. (1989 : 13)

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