

Alternative media, alternative texts?

Rethinking democratisation in the cultural industries

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The radical wing of media and cultural studies has been unrelentingly critical of media organisations. Terms with negative connotations abound: conglomeration, commodification, the concentration of symbolic power in too few hands. Undeniably, all these processes are features of the contemporary media landscape. But students often complain that they are rarely given a sense of what positive goals they might argue for, in calling for reform and critique of the mass media. What forms might more democratically organised media take?

In fact, one positive concept has been dominant in the political economy of culture in recent years: the public sphere, the ideal of a space of communication where people can participate equally, regardless of background, and where reason, rather than power, will determine the outcomes of discussion (Habermas 1989 [1962]). While still a central issue in current debates, the concept is tottering, close to collapse under the accumulated weight of criticism. A particularly damaging critique has come from feminists. Even those feminist writers who are sympathetic to the idea have worried that, as a model for mass communication, as well as in historical reality, the bourgeois public sphere comes alarmingly close to a kind of gentlemen's club (e.g. Fraser 1992).¹

While recognising the very rich contributions made to media theory by work on the public sphere, this chapter attempts to construct a positive model of media democratisation which draws on a different theoretical legacy often sidelined by those who have tried to apply Habermas's idea to contemporary mass communication (and which has been even more marginalised by much cultural-studies writing). This is a tradition which focuses more closely than the public-sphere model on the emancipatory possibilities

James Curran (ed.), *Media Organisations and Society*
(London: Arnold, 2000)

of organisational and technological innovation in the media. While nearly always critical of media organisations, it may also serve as a much-needed source of positive, idealistic thinking in an age of defeatism and miserable pragmatism. This legacy of writing often takes the work of Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin as a starting-point, and examines how existing media structures might be radicalised through activism. Although it has roots in interwar German Marxist writing, the tradition is upheld principally among radical writers based in North America (e.g. Kellner 1985, Wasko and Mosco (eds) 1992, Downing 1995). The term I will use for this body of writing is *alternative media activism* (AMA). Emerging from attempts at intervention in media practice, it sometimes lacks the methodological rigour of theoretical work in other traditions. It is often prone to the criticism that it invests new technologies with too great a transformational potential. Nevertheless, the writings of Brecht, Benjamin and their later followers provide fertile ground for thinking about how the media might be changed for the better. In this brief survey, I will use this literature to outline some of the key goals of a radical media practice, as formulated by AMA writers. The aim is to lay out some criteria by which we might judge the success or otherwise of those cultural producers who attempt to bring about a democratic transformation of the way in which cultural texts and artefacts are produced and distributed. None of these criteria is uncontroversial or unambiguous, and I want to register debates and doubts about these terms, while retaining them as normative concepts. Reflecting my own research interests, I shall mainly draw here on examples from the music industry, but will refer throughout to other cultural industries too.²

The AMA literature has an additional advantage over scholarly work which has drawn on the idea of the public sphere and over much recent analytical work on the media in general. The critical-political economy tradition has enormously emphasised informational content over media form, and has tended to value cognitive and rational modes of thought over the aesthetic, the emotional and the affective (see McGuigan 1998 for a similar argument). Judged as a whole, the political economy approach, for all its strengths, can perhaps be fairly accused of treating entertainment as merely a *distraction*, a diversion from what it sees as the most desirable goal of mass communication: the activism of the concerned, rational, participatory citizen. Entertainment, according to this view, gets in the way of the kinds of serious public-affairs programmes which citizens might watch more of, were there not so many other, more trivial options available to them.

There is an essential point which must not be lost here. Citizens need to be informed about public life and good journalism can undoubtedly promote the pursuit of social justice and the abuse of social power. But it is vitally important too that issues of form and aesthetics are not dismissed, and that entertainment is not treated as though it must always be inferior to the presentation of information. Today, people in 'advanced' industrial societies are bombarded by the images, sounds and words of the entertain-

ment industries every day of their lives. Any normative model of media democratisation will need to pay close attention to the aesthetics of entertainment. Only by understanding the enormously powerful affective role of such texts can we grasp the politics of contemporary culture.

To ignore issues of aesthetics has another unfortunate consequence besides this failure to address changing reality. It also serves to sideline the concerns of those who work within media organisations. For creative workers in such organisations constantly have to ask themselves what are ultimately aesthetic questions: how do we get our message across to audiences? what pleasures do we provide? what innovations might we bring about? how can we mark our work as different from that of our rivals? In my view, the AMA literature offers a much greater awareness of the politics of aesthetics than its rival intellectual traditions, but rather than treating the aesthetic as a realm autonomous of the dynamics of production, as in much cultural-studies work, AMA is concerned (though not always satisfactorily) with the relationship between the organisation of media production and the political-aesthetic nature of the product.

This dual concern with both process and product determines the structure of what follows. I begin with ways in which it might be possible to conceive of the democratisation of the means of cultural production (sections 1–4). I then move on to concepts which the alternative media literature has generated to discuss the transformation of the form and content of cultural products (5–6). As will become clear, the relationships between democratisation of the means of production and democratisation of the political-aesthetic nature of texts are too complex to define in a simple, programmatic manner. But the nature of such links needs to be interrogated rather than ignored.

1 Participation and access

One of the most widely cited texts in the AMA tradition is a brief passage by Brecht about radio, first published in 1932. These comments envisage the transformation of the medium from an apparatus of 'distribution' to one of 'communication' (Brecht 1978 [1932]: 52). The value appealed to here is a long-standing belief that widespread participation is at the heart of democratic activity, because it provides a check on the power of representatives, elected or otherwise. Much of the AMA literature has stressed the desirability of widening access in restrictive and exclusive media, in order to make available new voices, new experiences, and perspectives which would normally be excluded from the specialised, professional world of mainstream production. The most discussed example is the public-access television movement in the US (Kellner 1985, Boddy 1990, Anderson and Goldman 1993). Many of these AMA writers follow Brecht in looking to new or developing technologies as the means for greater participation.

The notions of access and participation can be woolly ones. For some

activists, participation seems to be an end in itself. But the 'self-realisation' of participants is not a sufficient criterion for judging the successful democratisation of a medium. Communication consists of more than just the sending or encoding of messages. The audiences for cultural artefacts and performances also need to be considered. How are these audiences reached? With what effect on the communication? What do audiences make of the performance or artefact in question? We need, then, to look at access to the *distribution* of cultural goods, as well as to their *production*.⁴ To give one example of these issues from the music industry, there is evidence that large numbers of unskilled entrants (musicians and record-company staff) came into the music business market after punk and dance became prominent in British musical-cultural life, in the late 1970s and late 1980s respectively. But only where networks of retail and distribution were formed (see Hesmondhalgh 1997 on one such network, based around Rough Trade Records) was it possible for these new entrants to gain access to the higher levels of promotion and publicity needed to 'participate' on a scale which gained sustained national attention. To put all this simply, it is one thing for cheap technology to allow someone to make a record in her/his bedroom; it is quite another to sell that record to someone you have never met, who lives 300 miles away.

In examining access and participation, we also need to take account of the range of discourses in operation in a particular type of cultural work. Many musicians and music-industry entrepreneurs, for example, tend to speak disparagingly of professionalism, and choose to work in the music industry because it does not appear to have developed a set of professional codes. This has fed into the emphasis on deskilling in post-punk and in dance music culture, and has arguably encouraged access and participation. But there is also widespread admiration, often among the very same musicians and record-company workers, for processes of long-term aesthetic development which are possible only with professionalisation. Many enthusiasts find themselves having to learn professional skills 'on the job' in order to match the more established companies and entrepreneurs in a competitive market. These innovators then have to negotiate their own professionalisation, leading to many conflicts in 'alternative' media organisations over the extent to which an original democratising vision has been abandoned (see Hesmondhalgh 1999 for a study of such conflicts in indie/alternative rock).

The dynamics of the television industry offer a contrasting example. The costs of entry into this highly restricted world of production mean that 'alternative' television (as outlined for example by Boddy 1990) operates very much on the fringes of broadcasting institutions: rarely publicised, minimally resourced and hardly watched. There is a very strong professional discourse within television which places a high value on technical 'finish'. Training takes years and experience is hard to come by, even with the recent proliferation of channels across the world. It is very difficult to get to

appear on television, whether in a paid capacity or in order to present a viewpoint. It is even harder to appear on your own terms, without being considerably constrained by the very tight presentational conventions of television. In Brecht's terms, then, television is hardly a medium of communication at all, rather it is one almost entirely of distribution. It would be foolhardy to predict that the proliferation of channels in the new broadcasting environment of the late 1990s and early twenty-first century will improve this situation. Many of the channels to which it will be possible for higher numbers of people to gain access, in terms of appearing or having their voices and opinions heard, will be confined to low-prestige, low-audience sectors, at least for the foreseeable future.

2 Collectivism, collaboration, co-operation

Today, there is still a widespread conception of cultural creativity which sees it in its highest form as the product of individual labour. Writers have pointed out the empirical inaccuracy of this image, and have shown that even the most seemingly individual, autonomous forms of fine art are the product of many individuals working together (e.g. Becker 1982, Wolff 1993). To value collaboration means taking an unfashionable attitude towards the politics of work. Increasingly, there is an assumption among even liberal and left-oriented professionals that meritocratic workplaces offer greater satisfactions and rewards than workplaces where the emphasis is on equality. In presenting this model of democratisation, however, I want to operate from a different assumption: that people operate better where there is a minimum degree of hierarchical control, and where there are high levels of equality of responsibility, opportunity and reward. An ideal is collaboration with genuine equality. This is never achieved in practice, in capitalist societies riddled with class, gender and ethnic divisions. However, the nearer particular moments come to this ideal, the more successful I think we should assume them to be in terms of democratisation, other things being equal.

Democratic and equal collaboration within a particular working situation is not progressive in itself, however. Many institutions operate with a high degree of internal democracy, but work as part of broader systems which are intensely hierarchical and exclusive. Prime examples would be the fellows of Oxbridge colleges, or professional partnerships of lawyers, accountants and doctors. Co-operation, then, is an external as well as an internal matter. The competitive nature of the cultural industries, and the celebration of enterprise which is often to be found within them, militate against systems of inter-firm co-operation. Nevertheless, there have been notable instances of *networks* of creative workers, entrepreneurs, technicians and others which served to overcome at least some of the cut-throat mentality of market thinking. In many instances, such networking has been

carried out within the logic and mentality of the market: that is, it was done merely in order to achieve competitive advantage over firms outside the network. But there are cases where such connections have been forged specifically in order to transform the competitive nature of the cultural marketplace, and to create alliances against what were perceived to be hegemonic industrial, political and aesthetic forms. Herman and McChesney (1997: 200) offer some instances, such as the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC) or the Global Alternative Media Association (GAMA).

It is important not to romanticise collaboration. The practical difficulties involved in day-to-day collaboration on a piece of cultural work often go beyond those involved in networks based on occasional phone and e-mail contact. Some sociologists have suggested that music is particularly prone to collaboration in a whole range of expressive situations (Becker 1982), including the recording studio, as decisions are made about how best to communicate with an audience (Hennion 1990 [1983]). This is not to deny, as any musician will testify, that musical collaboration is riven with conflict. The point is that certain forms of musical practice defy the widespread conception of cultural labour I referred to above, which sees it as dependent, at its best, on individual talent or genius. Once recordings are introduced into the commercial system of circulation, however, this complex division of labour is effaced. Companies rely on the name of a musician to allow audiences to identify the likely sound of a particular recording. Thus, even though the recording might be a relatively collaborative act, involving the producer/sound mixer, engineer, record-company A&R representatives, the artist's manager, and so on, the final product is mainly credited to the musician or group who act as the public 'face' of the recording. This problem of authorship is also evident in the history of the cinema, where for many years there was a very strong division between commercial, entertainment cinema on the one hand and 'art' cinema on the other. In the latter branch, films were (and, to some degree, still are) identified with particular directors, or 'auteurs'.⁵ As with the star system in the recording industry, a complex division of labour is here masked under the cloak of individualism.

So, in the world of the cultural industries, to what extent is co-operation and collaboration (rather than merely a complex division of labour) possible? Crucial aspects to consider here are *company size* and *ownership*. Much of the general literature on co-operative work suggests that democratic decision-making becomes more difficult as a firm grows (e.g. Rothschild and Whitt 1986: 91–5). One writer has suggested that workplace egalitarianism becomes impossible when general meetings of staff exceed the size where everyone could feasibly make a contribution (Russell 1985). Here we return to the qualified norm of participation suggested in the first section above. Small firms are places where owner-managers can maintain tyrannical domination over staff, with the right to hire and fire, unchecked by unionised labour. Some socialists have rejected claims for the progressive

potential of smaller working units because they make collective action by labour more difficult. Others have quite rightly questioned the degree to which small cultural producers can be seen as evidence of a new, more democratic era in media production (e.g. Sparks 1994) or of a flexible, post-Fordist economy characteristic of 'New Times' (e.g. Aksoy and Robins 1992). But more benign owner-managers can produce an atmosphere of collaboration within and across firms, which, as some writers on co-operatives have pointed out, makes their companies more collaborative than co-operatives collectively owned but dominated by core personalities (Rothschild and Whitt 1986). Small workplaces are all too often riven with conflict and lost friendships, but they are also places of potential equality and co-operation.

Ownership too is a vital area of analysis in looking at cultural producers, of whatever size. In media and cultural studies, the main arena for debates on the importance, or otherwise, of ownership and control has been the sociology of journalism, particularly concerning the freedom of journalists to make decisions about their work independently of the interference of owners (e.g. Tunstall 1971, Hall et al. 1978, Curran 1990). Such work suggests that there are no fixed rules about how control is operated in cultural production companies. But, following Graham Murdock's important borrowing of the distinction between 'allocative' and 'operational' control from the organisational sociology (Murdock 1982), I take it as axiomatic that the ultimate power over decisions about how the firm operates, particularly in matters of long-term 'allocative' strategy, rather than in everyday issues of 'operational control', lies with its owners. Company policy towards employees is inevitably compromised by the search for profit, though it is surely less compromised in some small companies, where enlightened owner-managers effectively manage the company for relatively little profit, than by the absolute obligation to produce profit for shareholders to be found in entertainment corporations. In summary, ownership, control and company size are important factors to investigate in discussing collaborative and co-operative aspects of the 'democratisation' of cultural production. Yet these have been strangely neglected in recent work on the production of culture.

3 Status and rewards

The low degree of democratisation in the cultural industries is manifested not only in inequalities in the power to make decisions affecting processes and outcomes, but also in unequal distribution of status and rewards available to cultural workers. The neglect of this issue in the sociology of culture has been remarkable. Many books exist on film, recording, broadcasting and publishing, and yet few make reference to the working conditions and financial recompense available to the people working in these industries.

Such issues have been absolutely central to the sociology of work in general, so why have they been marginalised in the study of *cultural work*? It may be that the sociology of culture has been unconsciously influenced by analyses which view creative artistic work as autonomous: the very form of analysis which it has often sought to critique. Another likely explanation is that the sociology of work often examines the type of waged work which prevailed in western societies from the industrial revolution until the 1980s. Creative professionals, by contrast, are often rewarded by copyright payments, and make their living by contracting themselves to a number of different organisations over their career. Given that much work is taking this more 'flexible' form (though that word masks the insecurities and anxieties surrounding such working conditions) perhaps the study of remuneration and status in the cultural industries can provide a template by which to look at changes in other sectors.

A rare analysis of the conditions of cultural workers is provided by Bernard Miège (though see also Gray and Seeber 1996 on labour relations in the arts and entertainment industries). In particular, Miège notes the reliance of cultural firms on the existence of 'vast reservoirs of under-employed artists' (Miège 1989: 72) and the generation, accentuation and use by such companies of 'contradictions' between various professionals in the cultural industries. These include contradictions between authors; between artists and other members of the artistic professions; and between authors and performers (Miège 1989: 87-93). Miège also notes the 'vitality of small "independent" companies' in providing 'greater independence' for artists to create their works, and a means of 'avoiding the leonine clauses' of contracts with major corporations (Miège 1989: 90). Miège is unusual, then, in recognising the democratising potential to be found in small cultural producers.

The relationship between the commercial company and its creative artists is at the heart of the notion of democratisation in the cultural industries. In the music industry, this relationship is embodied in the contract between the two parties. There are three main types of contract that a musician might sign: management, publishing and recording. Publishing and recording deals generally take the following form. The musicians agree to render their services exclusively to the company for a specified period and in certain specified territories. In return, the company will normally make commitments to promote the work of the artists. The musicians are paid an advance and then, when such an advance has been recouped via sales, they are paid a royalty. The long history of dubious contracts and career-breaking rip-offs cannot be told here.⁶ But two main areas of general controversy can be identified, relating to the standard advance-royalty/exclusivity contract between musicians and company.

The first area concerns the financial rewards available for artists. The advance is essentially a loan against money which the musicians' recordings will make. Repayment is 'cross-collateralised' against costs such as record-

ing and touring. In many cases, the advance is never recouped and musicians can be in debt to their record company for many years. Many young bands enter into this system unaware of the difficulties of recouping the substantial advances that they initially welcome. The level of royalty rate is set in the initial contract as a certain percentage of retail sales. Generally, the level of the royalty rises as the artist makes more records – the justification for this is that the company has to invest more resources initially, in order to establish the artist's career. In most contracts, however, costs are still recoupable against royalties – in other words, artists pay for their recording and for many promotional expenses out of their earnings. Yet the company retains the lion's share of the money and retains control of copyrights – increasingly, the source of much of the wealth in the cultural industries.

The second area of controversy relates to the artistic autonomy of artists and the level of commitment shown by a company to an artist's output. A particularly important issue in the music business in recent years has been the restraints on artists brought about by the long-term nature of the recording and/or publishing contract. Although established star names are able to negotiate relatively high royalty rates, many contracts remain very long-term in nature – and this is actually a disadvantage for the artist. Normally, the company has a right to exercise an option or a series of options to retain the artist's services. The standard contract is asymmetrical, however, in that the artist must fulfil certain criteria if s/he wants to be retained by the company, but s/he cannot choose to leave. These criteria will usually include sales – which are dependent on the efforts of the record company. A danger for the artist in being held to a long-term contract is that the sympathetic staff who signed her/him may leave the label, to be replaced by personnel with little interest in her/his work; the other is that any change of direction by a musician may receive an unsympathetic reception from the record company.⁷

At various independent record companies associated with the punk genre, new ways of dealing with artists were developed which challenged the standard arrangements in the music industry. Deals with musicians were often on a 50-50 basis, rather than the usual single-figure percentage royalty rates. Long-term contracts were rejected in favour of deals based on personal trust. The aim of such deals was to be as 'musician-centred' as possible. Contracts were avoided on the grounds that the standard contracts were loaded in favour of companies and that if the personal trust between musicians and companies broke down there was no point in pursuing the relationship anyway. These companies generally favoured record-by-record deals, which gave artists the freedom to move on to other companies, should they so wish. The 50-50 deals meant that payment rates for musicians were enormously higher than the single-figure percentage royalty rates common even for established bands on major labels. If a band could achieve high sales on such a deal, they would make a great deal of money.

In the end, the post-punk rebellion was unsuccessful; and many musicians became disenchanted with the lack of promotion which such small companies could provide. But the punk intervention serves as an example of attempts to transform the apparatus of *commercial* cultural production. All too often, the literature on 'alternative media' is confined to very small, marginal interventions, operating so far outside most people's experience of popular culture that they are known only to small groups of activists and intellectuals. Here, however, activism took place actually in the field of commercial entertainment production itself.

4 Decentralisation

Some progressive forms of cultural policy, often under the influence of the AMA literature, orient themselves towards the geographical decentralisation of media industries.⁸ Although decentralisation is not a sufficient condition for democratisation, there are reasons for thinking it is a necessary one. In Britain, for example, nearly all the principal media industries are heavily concentrated around London and south-east England. In spite of the efforts of cultural regulation over the last 40 years, television has become heavily centralised too (Robins and Cornford 1992). One of the progressive aims of public-service broadcasting was to ensure provision for the regions, but for the London-centred British audio-visual media such regional bases are often considered to be 'backwaters', nightmare postings to be endured rather than learned from. Few British cities have developed successful internal markets able to sustain jobs and develop skills at a local level. Such centralisation may well encourage aesthetic standardisation, whereby distinctive regional ways of experiencing the world, and of representing that experience, are marginalised.

Alongside the centralisation of talent and resources within a particular nation state, the international centralisation of cultural production also needs to be stressed, in thinking about how the media might be democratised on a global level. Because of the international domination of English as the language of business and popular culture, Britain and the USA are at the 'core' rather than the 'periphery' of many media industries. But this is of little consolation to those cultural workers within Britain and the USA who have been unable to gain access to centralised resources from their regional bases.

Different dynamics of decentralisation and centralisation can be observed in the music industry. Music is in itself relatively decentralised as a form of expression, partly because its instruments are often portable, and relatively inexpensive. Certain skills can be self-taught, or passed on from person to person. Technologically and commercially mediated music, in the modern world, is to be found everywhere. There are many examples, then, of the growth of local recording and live 'scenes' in numerous different genres. But opportunities for building careers around music, and for communi-

cating on a wider scale than the local, remain unevenly distributed. In Britain, for example, the growth of a scene around a particular city is soon dissipated as musicians and other creative personnel are lured away to London for more money and greater recognition.

5 Mobilisation

Sections 1-4 of this chapter represent a programmatic statement about the undemocratic nature of contemporary cultural production and a typology of it how it might be democratised. I have referred in passing to how this undemocratic state of affairs might be transformed in practice by cultural activism. These are transformations which, in my view, would be desirable in any form of work. But the cultural industries are different from other industries because they are concerned with the production of signifying systems, of aesthetic and informational objects. How might we think about the democratisation of *texts*? In a classic work of alternative media activism, Hans Magnus Enzensberger lists 'mobilisation' as one of the key features of a democratic media system (Enzensberger 1974: 113). This refers to the way cultural products can encourage a critical attitude towards social and artistic conditions, and can initiate action in response to those conditions. Mobilisation is a potentially useful concept here in drawing links between aesthetic strategies and other levels of analysis of media organisations: discursive, technological, industrial, legal. But, as with the concepts already discussed, I want to signal my caution in using this term.

The main problem with the concept of mobilisation as a way of fusing attention to textual aesthetics and to social relations is that it risks collapsing aesthetics into the notions of access and participation discussed above. This is the case in Walter Benjamin's often-cited but, in my opinion, over-rated essay, 'The Author as Producer', a starting-point for much AMA literature. Having pointed out the importance of aesthetic strategy as well as political inclination, Benjamin then defines progressive formal innovation in terms of its capacity to mobilise other cultural producers (although he never uses the German word for 'mobilisation'): '*An author who teaches writers nothing, teaches no one*. What matters, therefore, is the exemplary character of production, which is able first to induce other producers to produce, and second to put an improved apparatus at their disposal' (Benjamin 1978 [1934]: 233, original emphasis). But then the 'improved' nature of this apparatus is defined chiefly by reference to the fact that it makes consumers into producers. So the second example of 'what matters' sounds very much like the first. As is often the case in his writing, the example Benjamin gives is of Brecht's epic theatre which, by drawing on elements of the new arts of film and radio, and by stripping theatre down to its 'primitive elements', turned the passivity of theatrical musicians, writers and critics into something more active. Brecht provides cultural performances which supposedly

mobilise audiences and which do so, at least partly, by engaging with popular forms. It is apparent too, from other key works of Benjamin (most notably 1973 [1936]) that these popular forms are interesting to him because they offer technological innovations which potentially provide new ways of understanding the world.

Benjamin's call for cultural producers to address not only issues of form and content, but also their position in a production 'apparatus', is important. This is a form of cultural politics preferable to those versions of cultural studies which stress the activity of *audiences* as a sufficient means for judging the effectiveness of the aesthetic strategies and formal innovations adopted by producers (e.g. Fiske 1987). However, Benjamin's conception of the importance of form in 'The Author as Producer' is limited. Technique, Benjamin implies, is good where it encourages participation, and participation is valuable for its own sake. This reduces the problem of the political aesthetic as to whether technique produces more art by more people. Participation is an essential part of any democratic model of cultural production, but here it seems to be portrayed as an end in itself. This merely defers the question of what makes for a radical political aesthetic, rather than answering it.

Another problem with the concept of mobilisation is that it carries with it connotations of a view which sees the best art as that which brings about activism in support of a political cause. Although I think it is important to maintain, against an aestheticist position, art's ability to suppress or promote awareness of prevailing social conditions, I do not believe that creative expression can be judged purely on the basis of its political efficacy in this way.⁹ It must be possible to pursue a broader notion of what 'good' cultural production might involve than that occasionally found on the far left, where films, songs, books and so on are sometimes judged more or less entirely on the basis of whether or not they bring forward the date of the socialist revolution. For that view downplays the psychological, emotional and private resonances of cultural expression too much. As Wolff (1993) observes, it fails to recognise the specificity of the aesthetic realm. The widespread feeling among people of liberal and socialist views that an exclusively political reading of culture is insufficient and unsatisfactory has led to a crisis in the 1990s in the notion of the political aesthetic and I return to these issues in the next section.

In spite of its drawbacks, I still think the notion of mobilisation might be useful. From the vantage-point of the 1990s, perhaps it is possible to put forward a more fully developed conception of mobilisation, by combining its connotations of participation with the idea of working collaboratively and collectively. This is stressed more intermittently than other concepts, such as access and co-operation, in the AMA literature, but it is an essential component of any more fully developed politics of cultural production. So, in order to develop the concept further, we might ask: what kind of participation is encouraged by the radical text? Does it genuinely involve a reaching out towards the creativity of others, an attempt to temper one's own indi-

vidual vision of what constitutes 'good' cultural work by taking into account the very different notions of value which might be produced in other communities, from other points of view? By asking these questions, it might be possible to update the concerns of the German interwar Marxists to take more fully into account recent debates about cultural difference and respect for the 'Other'.

6 Quality, diversity and innovation

The three main ways in which commentators have attempted to develop a systematic language concerning aesthetics in media theory have been via the notions of quality, diversity and innovation.

The difficulties surrounding the term *quality* in television discourse are well established, and indicate some of the problems of developing political-aesthetic criteria for judging media texts, in particular popular cultural texts. The term was for many years associated with the application of aesthetic criteria derived from the literary novel and from the theatre (i.e. from 'high' culture forms) to television. As Corner (1995: 168-71) suggests, the specific properties of television make the use of such criteria inappropriate for use in public debate about the merits or otherwise of the medium: it is, in spite of the rise of narrowcasting, a heterogeneous medium; it uses many other forms besides the single piece of fiction characteristic of theatre and cinema; and it addresses people in their everyday lives, as a 'relaxant' rather than as a special event. While this makes it a powerful medium, it also means that individual television programmes are less 'dense' in symbolic meaning than other expressive forms. Reacting against the dismissal of television characteristic of much public debate, media and cultural studies in the 1970s and 1980s therefore tended to shun the word 'quality', preferring political analysis to moral-aesthetic evaluation. But, by the late 1980s, media and cultural studies writers started to argue for the restoration of issues of evaluation and quality in political debates about television, partly as a means of defending public-service broadcasting against neo-conservative 'deregulation' (see Brunson 1990, Mulgan 1990). Nevertheless, problems with the term 'quality' persist. Is it possible to make general statements about what constitutes good television, or good cinema, or good popular music? Or should each popular genre be judged only on its own terms – that is, according to the expectations of value which the genre implicitly sets up? There is little sign of a resolution to these issues and some political economy writers have resorted to the concept of *diversity* as a means by which to assess the level of democratisation in a medium at the level of outcome. There is a tendency in such literature for diversity merely to be stated as a goal (e.g. Murdock 1990: 81-2) or for dubious statistical measurements to be used, making reference to an industry's own marketing classifications as the basis for a typology of genre (e.g. Christianen 1995).

A richer tradition, which in many respects runs in parallel with the AMA literature I have discussed above, is the Marxian analysis of the politics of aesthetic strategies (e.g. Bloch *et al.* 1980). The dominant strand of such writing has seen formal *innovation* as the basis of a progressive political aesthetic. The most impressive and forbidding attempt to develop such an aesthetic was that of Theodor Adorno. Like many other modernists, Marxist and otherwise, Adorno saw art as radical where it subverted traditional, established forms. But Adorno was careful to distinguish between the 'pseudo-individualisation' characteristic of most commodified cultural production (see Adorno 1990 [1941]) and the authentic innovation provided, in his view, by 'autonomous' art, which could offer a critique of a whole society (the 'totality') through experiments in the formal language of a particular artistic medium (Adorno 1976). Adorno and other critical modernists' focus on formal innovation has come under attack from postmodernist cultural theory, which is less concerned with the need for innovation and (to cut a long story short) more with the undermining of authority through parody, irony and self-referentiality. An interesting intervention in this respect has been made by Georgina Born. From a position sceptical of both modernism and postmodernism, Born (1987: 64–8) has criticised efforts to apply modernism's notion of shock and negation as social critique to popular culture, on the grounds that such efforts universalise modernism's strategies, making them trans-historical and cyclical, rather than recognising them as the product of very specific conjunctions of art and politics. But, if a modernist, avant-garde notion of innovation is no longer applicable, this raises the question of what democratising political-aesthetic strategies are appropriately imaginable for now or for the near future. Postmodernist aesthetics aims at developing new models, but as Born and others (e.g. Goodwin 1991) have shown, it often makes premature claims about the changing nature of contemporary cultural production, for example the degree to which 'high' and 'low' cultural forms have collapsed into one another. Again, we see evidence here of a crisis in the notion of the political aesthetic, and of the difficulty of talking about the democratisation of texts.

In calling for recognition and analysis of the aesthetic realm, there is a danger of *idealism* (in one of its philosophical senses, rather than in the everyday sense of an impragmatic pursuit of ideals): of attributing too much autonomy and explanatory power to the role of ideas and consciousness. Adorno and other modernists were perhaps guilty of this. In Adorno's work, good art is attributed with enormous powers of social change; and bad culture is symptomatic of the most fundamental flaws in societies. In spite of the dangers of such idealism, it is still important to recognise the provisional effectiveness of cultural products in asking audiences to reflect on, resist and challenge prevailing political conditions. I say 'provisional' because there are no fixed laws for what constitutes progressive aesthetic practice. As Janet Wolff puts it:

The conditions under which art may be effective, politically and historically, are determined both by the nature of cultural production at that moment, and its possibilities, and by the nature of contemporary society, and in particular of its general ideology.

(Wolff 1993: 85)

This effectivity is a matter not only of the cognitive content of cultural products, of the 'message' behind the narrative of a film, or the words of a song. It also concerns issues of form, which are often much more difficult to talk about. As film-makers, musicians and television personnel find new forms (new sounds, styles, editing techniques, visual sensibilities, modes of address) which provide new pleasures for audiences, they raise questions about cultural change. At its most powerful, the arrival of a new style can bring about a sense of alliance between people relatively marginalised in the unequal world of contemporary capitalism. While the work of translating such feelings into concrete action for social change might still be difficult, such emotions are none the less significant. So we need the concepts of mobilisation, quality, diversity and innovation as potential guides for assessing aesthetic democratisation, but we need to move beyond them in order to develop clearer and fuller ways to think about aesthetics after modernism.

Towards a model

I have briefly outlined six categories which, although they employ ambivalent and controversial terms, might be used as a normative basis for looking at democratisation in the cultural industries. I need hardly point out that the six categories of factor would interact in complex and unexpected ways. Reduced to its bare bones, however, the model works in something like the following way. An industry, sector, organisation or firm is democratised where:

- 1 participation and access are widened;
- 2 producers are more likely to act collaboratively and co-operatively than competitively and in circumstances of hierarchical control;
- 3 there is a greater equality of reward, opportunity and conditions for creative workers;
- 4 resources and talent are spread more widely and relatively evenly across geographical space;
- 5 the texts produced and circulated promote the adventurous and critical participation of consumers, encouraging them to produce as well as receive;
- 6 high-quality, diverse, innovative and adventurous texts emerge from such participation.

Unless I felt that the current situation in the cultural industries was relatively undemocratic, an examination of these issues would hardly be worth undertaking. There is a surprisingly widespread view among those who work in the media that the current state of things is more or less satisfactory. This can perhaps best be summarised in the comments of one industry insider at a music-industry conference I once attended, to the effect that there was no need for local or central government to fund any cultural activity, as the free market ensured that anyone with talent would eventually, given enough perseverance, 'make it'. But who decides who has the talent? And shouldn't cultural expression be about more than a handful of well-rewarded stars and a vast pool of under-paid strugglers? The music-industry insider comment reveals the need to think carefully and systematically about the nature of media organisations today.

I have also argued that, in examining such issues, process and product need to be considered in tandem. In exploring media democratisation, the provisional effectiveness of aesthetics I mentioned above can never be understood in isolation from the social and institutional conditions of cultural production. A particularly difficult challenge will be to explore the relationship between such conditions and the results which cultural producers create from such conditions. Do attempts to democratise the way that the media are produced and distributed result in 'better' media texts? Do alternative media organisations produce alternative media texts? The simple answer is: not necessarily. There is no simple correlation between democratic forms of production and 'good' oppositional texts.¹⁰ The vast resources of the most hierarchical and exploitative corporations allow them to sign up talented and highly motivated people to produce brilliant, funny, powerful films, TV shows and records. It is important not to dismiss the pleasures of *Seinfeld* or the Fugees (both produced and distributed by major corporations) as mere exploitation and appropriation. Hence my arguments above for the need to think through issues of entertainment aesthetics. But more inspiring is the triumph of those who manage to produce moments of creative excitement and adventure from 'outside' that system, against the odds, and often with disregard for the accumulation of wealth and status which might be available elsewhere.

Notes

- 1 A very useful survey of debates about the public sphere is provided by Thompson (1993). See also Calhoun (ed.) (1992).
- 2 There is no space here to deal with important questions concerning whether information technology has democratised the media and cultural industries, in particular about whether the Internet has democratised mass communication. But I hope to provide a framework which other, more qualified commentators might be able to use in order to consider such questions with clarity.
- 3 The term used by political philosopher Jon Elster to criticise the notion of 'participatory democracy' (cited in Hagen 1992).

- 4 The importance of distribution to understanding power in the cultural industries is a vital insight of the political-economy approach to mass communications (see in particular Mège 1989 and Garham 1990). Sociology of culture has also paid significant attention to distribution (e.g. Becker 1982).
- 5 Where the directors of commercial, entertainment cinema were identified, it was often retrospectively by cinema obsessives and critics, rather than as part of the promotion of a film.
- 6 Some important developments in contractual law in the entertainment industry are surveyed by Greenfield and Osborn (1994); and, in a journalistic account, by Garfield (1986).
- 7 This was a central issue in Panayiotou versus Sony Music Entertainment (UK) Limited – the George Michael case. Michael tried unsuccessfully to argue in this important dispute with his record company that his long-term contract with Sony was a 'restraint of trade' under European law.
- 8 See, for example, the recommendations of the report on Greater Manchester, by the Centre for Employment Research (1989).
- 9 This, in my view, is a problem in the work of some of the US-based inheritors of German Marxism's analysis of culture, for example Douglas Kellner's readings of 'media culture' (Kellner 1995).
- 10 Born (1993: 285) makes a similar point when she writes that 'institutional alterity does not produce aesthetic difference or political dissent, just as inhabiting the institutional mainstream does not completely preclude them'.

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