

Early cinema, late cinema: permutations of the public sphere

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There tends to be a moment in the development of cultural practices when discourses of the recent past become history; they are no longer just outdated but, like bell-bottom jeans, mini-skirts and platform shoes, acquire historicity. This is what seems to have happened with film theory of the 1970s and early 1980s, particularly as it revolved around the notion of 'the spectator'. I am thinking here of psychoanalytic-semiotic approaches, often inflected with Marxist and feminist politics, associated with the names of Jean-Louis Baudry, the later Christian Metz, Raymond Bellour, Stephen Heath, Laura Mulvey, to mention only a few. As has widely been pointed out, the paradigmatic distinction of 1970s film theory, its break with earlier film theory, consisted of a shift in focus from textual structures or ontologies of the medium to processes of reception and spectatorship. Whether concerned with the cinematic apparatus or with textual operations of enunciation and address, these approaches converged in the question of how the cinema works to construct, interpellate and reproduce its viewer as subject, how it solicits actual moviegoers to identify with and through ideologically marked positions of subjectivity. In either case, the inquiry hinged upon the hypothetical term of an *ideal* spectator, a unified and unifying position offered by the text or apparatus, even if, as feminist and, more recently, subaltern critics have pointed out, this position for some viewers turns out to be a 'locus of impossibility',¹ of self-denial or masochism.

I will not reiterate the by now ritual critique of this type of film theory, whether concerning its epistemological and methodological

1 Mary Ann Doane, 'Miscognition and identity', *Cine Tracts* vol. 3 no. 3 (1980) p. 29.

shortcuts, its monolithic notion of classical cinema, or its abstract, passive conception of the spectator and processes of reception; all important issues when the theory was still current. What I find more interesting is that the very category of *the* spectator developed by psychoanalytic-semiotic film theory seems to have become obsolete – not only because new scholarship has displaced it with historically and culturally more specific models, but because the mode of reception this spectator was supposed to epitomize is itself becoming a matter of the past. The historical significance of 1970s theories of spectatorship may well be that they emerged at the threshold of a paradigmatic transformation of the ways films are disseminated and consumed. In other words, even as these theories set out to unmask the ideological effects of the classical Hollywood cinema, they might effectively, and perhaps unwittingly, have mummified the spectator–subject of classical cinema.

We are only now beginning to understand the massive changes that have assailed the institution of cinema over the past two decades, in the most advanced form in the United States but increasingly also in countries with traditionally state-sponsored institutions of film and television. These changes are the result of a combination of technological and economic developments that have displaced the cinema as the only and primary site of film consumption. New electronic technologies propped onto television, in particular video playback, satellite and cable systems, have shifted the venues for film viewing in the direction of domestic space and have profoundly changed the terms on which viewers can interact with films. The spatio-perceptual configuration of television within the domestic environment has broken the spell of the classical diegesis; the compulsive temporality of public projection has given way to ostensibly more self-regulated yet privatized, distracted and fragmented acts of consumption. As critics have observed, an aesthetics of the ‘glance’ is replacing the aesthetics of the ‘gaze’, the illusionist absorption of the viewer that is considered one of the hallmarks of classical cinema.²

These changes have in turn affected the cinema, in the old sense of the public, commercial projection of films on theatrical premises. For one thing, there have never – not since the days of the nickelodeon – been as many complaints about people talking during the shows as in the American press of recent months, with pundits charging that the vulgarians simply cannot tell the difference between watching a movie in the theatre and watching a video in their living-rooms. What such complaints signal is that the classical principle by which reception is controlled by the film as an integral product and commodity is weakened by the social proliferation of film consumption in institutionally less regulated viewing situations. For another, the increased dependence of film production on the video market has exacerbated the crisis of the audience that

² See John Ellis *Visible Fictions: Cinema, Television, Video* (London: Routledge, 1982) pp. 24, 50, 128, 137ff. also see Charles Eidsvik ‘Machines of the invisible: changes in film technology in the age of video’ *Film Quarterly* vol. 42 no. 2 (1988–9) p. 21.

Hollywood has confronted in various forms at least since the popularization of television in the 1950s. Blockbuster films, for instance, are catering to as many diverse constituencies as possible, confronting the problem of, as Timothy Corrigan puts it, 'an audience fragmented beyond any controllable identity'.³ These films – from *Gremlins* (Joe Dante 1984) to *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (Francis Ford Coppola 1992) – no longer attempt to homogenize empirically diverse viewers by way of unifying strategies of spectator positioning (as 1970s film theorists claimed with regard to classical films). Rather, the blockbuster gamble consists of offering something to everyone, of appealing to diverse interests with a diversity of attractions and multiple levels of textuality. All this is not to say that the classical mode of spectatorship has vanished without a trace; on the contrary, it makes powerful returns in the nostalgia mode. But it has become one of a number of options, often contextualized and ironized, and no longer functions as the totalitarian norm it is supposed to have been during the 1930s and 1940s.⁴

On a geopolitical level, this shift in film–spectator relations corresponds to the emergence of new transnational corporate networks that circulate movies and videos along with music, foods, fashions, advertising, information and communication technologies. While systems of distribution and exchange are interconnected and unified on a global scale, this process is characterized by a burgeoning diversification of products and, at the same time, an increased privatization of the modes and venues of consumption.⁵ New forms and genres of diasporic and indigenized mass culture have emerged, at once syncretistic and original, and imported products are transformed and appropriated through highly specific forms of reception.⁶ Thus, parallel with the demise of classical cinema, we have been witnessing the end of 'modern' mass culture, the kind of mass culture that prevailed, roughly, from the 1920s through the 1960s and is commonly associated with a Fordist economy, with standardized production and social homogenization, with critical keywords like secondary exploitation, Americanization and cultural imperialism. Today's postmodern, globalized culture of consumption has developed new, and ever more elusive, technologies of power and commodification, operating through diversification rather than homogenization: the worldwide manufacture of diversity does anything but automatically translate into a 'new cultural politics of difference'.⁷ But it has also multiplied the junctures at which such a politics could – and, in many places already has – come into existence, in particular with alternative practices in film and video.⁸ At any rate, whatever political score one may assign to these developments, it is obvious that they require theories of reception and identification different from those predicated on classical Hollywood cinema and the American model of mass culture.

3 Timothy Corrigan *A Cinema Without Walls: Movies and Culture after Vietnam* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991), p. 23.

4 Ironically, the European art film has become one of the more likely places for contemporary viewers to expect a relatively high degree of classical absorption. This may partially explain the success in the USA of *The Crying Game* (Neil Jordan, 1992), a film that despite its double reading still very much depends on a classical diegetic effect (without which its trick would not work).

5 Among the growing literature on these developments see for instance Arjun Appadurai, 'Disjuncture and difference in the global cultural economy', *Public Culture*, vol. 2 (1990), pp. 1–24; Mike Featherstone (ed.), *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 7, nos. 1/2 (1990) (special issue on global culture); Kevin Robins, 'Tradition and translation: national culture in its global context', in John Corner and Sylvia Harvey (eds), *Enterprise and Heritage: Crosscurrents of National Culture* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 21–44; Armand Mattelart, *La communication mondiale: histoire des idées et des stratégies* (Paris: Édition la découverte, 1992). See also Cynthia Schneider and Brian Wallis, *Global Television* (New York: Wedge Press; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988).

6 See for instance Hamid Naficy, *Autobiography film*.

spectatorship and cultural negotiation *Emergences* no 1 (1989) pp 29–54 and Naficy The poetics and practice of Iranian nostalgia in exile *Diaspora* vol 1 no 3 (1991) pp 285–302 Kobena Mercer Diaspora culture and the dialogic imagination the aesthetics of Black independent film in Britain in Manuel Alvarado and John O Thompson (eds) *The Media Reader* (London: BFI 1990) pp 24–35

7 Cornel West The new cultural politics of difference in Russell Ferguson Martha Gever Trinh T Minh ha Cornel West (eds) *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art Cambridge MA: MIT Press 1990) p 29

8 Examples in the USA include Guenilla TV Edge, Paper Tiger and Deep Dish Television On the critical status of such efforts see for example Patricia Mellencamp Prologue *Logics of Television* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1990) pp 1–13 Also pertinent in this regard is the ongoing debate over indigenous uses of film and video in ethnography see Terence Turner Defiant images the Kayapo appropriation of video, *Anthropology Today*, vol 8 no 6 (1992) pp 5–16

9 See, for instance, essays by Tom Gunning Charles Musser and others collected in Thomas Elsaesser (ed with Adam Barker) *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative* (London: BFI 1990) Gunning An aesthetic of astonishment: early film and the incredulous spectator *Art & Text*, no 34 (1989) pp 31–45 Noël Burch 'Porter, or ambivalence' *Screen* vol 19 no 4 (1978/9), pp 91–105 and *Life to Those Shadows* trans and ed Ben Brewster (Berkeley: University of California Press 1990) Musser *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1906* (New York: Scribners 1990) Musser *Before the Nickelodeon: Edwin S Porter and the Edison Manufacturing Company* (Berkeley: University of

As classical forms of consumption and spectatorship seem to be unravelling on a worldwide scale, the situation offers a certain *déjà vu* effect. In a number of ways, contemporary forms of media culture evoke the parallel of early cinema. As Tom Gunning and other film historians have demonstrated, early cinema differs from classical cinema above all in the conception of the relations between film and viewer, inasmuch as these can be inferred from textual modes of representation and address and from a history of exhibition practices. Specifically, early cinema is distinguished by an aesthetics of astonishment and display ('cinema of attractions'); a presentational style that addresses the viewer directly (rather than indirectly, through diegetic absorption); a greater diversity of genres and more overt reliance on cultural intertexts (such as the commercial entertainments, popular stories and songs, or political cartoons on which early films are largely based and which are essential to the viewer's understanding of the narrative), a disjunctive form of programming (predicated on the 'variety format') by which short films alternated with live performances on the principle of maximum contrast and variation, and, finally, a dispersal of meaning across filmic and non-filmic sources; that is, the complementation of the projected film by performative activities such as music, sound effects and on-stage lectures which lent the exhibition the character of a live event (as opposed to the eventual integration of all cinematic materials into the film as complete product and inter/nationally circulated commodity). Some of these characteristics – the variety format, the priority of the live theatre event over the film experience – persisted well into the nickelodeon period (1906 after all) and throughout the silent period, even as the films themselves were increasingly patterned on classical principles.⁹

The comparison between pre-classical and contemporary modes of film consumption has been floated occasionally in recent years, charged with more or less polemical valences. In an essay published in 1982, Noël Burch observes that 'United States network television constitutes a return to the days of the nickelodeon', and argues, with considerable alarm, that the disengaged, disjunctive format of US television might represent 'a veritable turning back of the clock', a regression that is nothing less than 'innocent'. This observation leads him to defend, as essential to a politically progressive form of media practice, the otherwise much maligned 'strong diegetic effect' of classical cinema, the 'Institutional Mode of Representation'.¹⁰ A decade later, parallels between pre-classical and post-classical forms of spectatorship, between early modern and postmodern forms of distraction and diversity, are even more pronounced, though no less in need of discussion. What is the point of such a comparison? How can we make it productive beyond formalist analogy, beyond nostalgia or cultural pessimism? How can we align those two moments without obliterating their historical difference?

- California Press 1991) Miriam Hansen *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press 1991) chs 1–3. For the persistence of the priority of theatre experience over film experience see Richard Koszarski *An Evening's Entertainment: The Age of the Silent Feature Picture 1915–1928* (New York: Scribners 1990) ch 2 and Douglas Gomery *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press 1992) ch 3.
- 10 Noel Burch *Narrative/diegesis – thresholds limits* *Screen* vol 23 no 2 (1982) p 33 (revised in *Life to those Shadows* p 263). Also see Thomas Elsaesser *TV through the looking glass* *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* vol 14 nos 1–2 (1992) p 5.
- 11 Meaghan Morris *Banality in cultural studies* in Mellencamp *Logics of Television* p 25. For a recent example of this tendency see Jim Collins *Uncommon Cultures: Popular Culture and Post-Modernism* (New York: London: Routledge 1989).

- 12 The term derived from Max Horkheimer's famous essay of 1937 *Traditional and Critical Theory* trans. Matthew J. O'Connell *Critical Theory* (New York: Continuum 1986) pp 188–243. The term 'Frankfurt School' refers strictly speaking only to those members of the Institute for Social Research who returned from exile in the 1950s, i.e. Horkheimer and Adorno and their disciples. Since *Critical Theory* has lost its specific historical reference in recent US usage, the term 'Frankfurt School' seems to have taken over this wider meaning.

I suggest that drawing a trajectory from post-classical to pre-classical cinema makes sense not only because of formal similarities in the relations of representation and reception. More importantly, these formal similarities warrant closer scrutiny because both moments mark a major transition in the development of the public sphere. I am using the term 'public' here in the most general sense, denoting a discursive matrix or process through which social experience is articulated, interpreted, negotiated and contested in an intersubjective, potentially collective and oppositional form. My understanding of this term is indebted to debates in the tradition of the Frankfurt School, associated with the work of Habermas and Negt and Kluge. Indeed, I would argue that the question of the public is probably the most fruitful legacy of the Frankfurt School for film and mass culture theory today. This, of course, requires thinking of the Frankfurt School in ways different from the caricatures we have been treated to, over the past decade, by proponents of cultural studies – caricatures doing duty for, as Meaghan Morris suggests, the equally discredited 'voices of grumpy feminists and cranky leftists'.¹¹ It requires abandoning the monolithic label of 'the Frankfurt School' (which, more often than not, reduces a vast body of critical thought to the chapter on the culture industry in Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and Adorno's essays on jazz) along with the equally stereotypical confrontation of Adorno, the 'mandarin' and 'pessimist' high modernist, with Walter Benjamin, the bourgeois theorist who, thanks to the help of Brecht, could nonetheless envision a democratic, class-conscious appropriation of mass and consumer culture.

Rather than a set of fixed positions, the tradition of the Frankfurt School connotes for me a set of political and theoretical concerns, of questions and controversies circulating in the larger context of 'Critical Theory',¹² a context that included, among others, Benjamin, Ernst Bloch and Siegfried Kracauer. While no longer the loose affiliation of marginalized Jewish–Marxist intellectuals it was during the Weimar period and, to some extent, in exile, this tradition survived into the 1960s and 1970s as a source of radical thought, a critical framework to work with, contest and revise. It played that part for a whole generation or two of West German intellectuals, artists and activists, including feminist theorists (such as Silvia Bovenschen, Gertrud Koch, and Heide Schlupmann) and the independent film culture that emerged in the 1960s, associated with the Oberhausen group and Alexander Kluge.

This is not the Frankfurt School that hates mass culture. It is, however, a continuation of a project that registered, early on, the key role of cinema and mass culture in the profound restructuration of subjectivity. At the same time it saw the modern media's liberatory, democratic potential evaporate in their alienating,

13 Kluge summarizes Adorno's attitude towards the cinema in the notorious quip 'I love to go to the movies: the only thing that bothers me is the image on the screen.' Klaus Eder and Alexander Kluge, *Ulmer Dramaturgien: Reibungsverluste* (Munich: Hanser, 1981), p. 48. For Kluge's relationship to Adorno, see Stuart Liebman's interview 'On New German Cinema: art, enlightenment and the public sphere' – an interview with Alexander Kluge, *October* no. 46 (1988), pp. 23–59, especially pp. 36ff. For Kluge's influence in turn on Adorno, see the latter's 1966 essay 'Transparencies on film', trans. Thomas Y. Levin, *New German Critique* nos. 24–25 (1981–2), pp. 199–205, as well as my introduction to that essay, *Babel and Babylon*, pp. 186–98.

14 Jürgen Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (Darmstadt: Neuwied/Luchterhand, 1962), trans. Thomas Burger, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989). See Craig Calhoun (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992); also see *Social Text* nos. 25/26 (1990), special issue devoted to 'The Phantom Public Sphere'.

15 See Nicholas Garnham, 'The media and the public sphere', in Calhoun (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, pp. 359–76; also Benjamin Lee, 'Textuality, mediation and public discourse', *ibid.* pp. 402–18.

conformist and manipulative use in Fordist-liberal capitalism, to say nothing of fascism. Kluge may well have shared Adorno's analysis of the culture industry (and its administrative, post-war West-German counterpart), even if he gently mocked his mentor's iconophobic and paranoid tendencies.¹³ But he drew different aesthetic and political conclusions from this analysis: he became a filmmaker and activist promoting an alternative film and media culture. Drawing on Adorno's own philosophy, in particular *Negative Dialectics* and the concept of non-identity, Kluge set out to mobilize the aporias of the culture industry thesis – by switching the frame from the logics of commodity and identity to the dynamics of the public sphere.

In English-language contexts, the category of 'the public' has become increasingly important to a wide variety of fields and debates – philosophy, anthropology, history, South Asian, East Asian and African studies, postcolonial and subaltern studies, the postmodern art scene, feminist, gay/lesbian and queer politics. If public sphere theory has so far had little impact on cinema and media studies, it has been for a good or, rather, not so good reason. Many of these debates take as their point of departure the framework developed by Jürgen Habermas in his 1962 study, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, which only recently appeared in English translation.¹⁴ The advantage of Habermas's approach, that he historicizes the concept of the public sphere by tracing its emergence in the eighteenth century, turns into a disadvantage when it comes to the mass-mediated publics of later centuries. Positing the Enlightenment idea of the public sphere as a critical norm (even as historically it has degenerated into an ideology), Habermas can view subsequent formations of public life only in terms of disintegration and decline. With the shift from cultural *Raisonement* to cultural consumption, so for Habermas, the dialectic of public and private unravels into individuated acts of reception, even in the context of mass events. The problem with this approach is not only that it remains squarely within the paradigm of the culture industry, but that the underlying notion of the public is predicated on face-to-face communication and is hence insufficient for conceptualizing mass-mediated forms of public life.¹⁵ (If Habermas's book nonetheless remains mandatory reading for anyone interested in the counterpublic potential of cinema, video and television, it is because it elaborates the public as a distinct dimension, a *fourth* term that mediates between the state, the marketplace and the intimate sphere of the family, as an arena of discursive interaction that constitutes the condition of radically democratic politics.)

It is in view of this paradox – the problem of how to conceptualize the dimension of the public in a technologically and industrially mediated public sphere that has eroded the very conditions of discursive interaction, participation and self-representation – that

16 Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge *Öffentlichkeit und Erfahrung* (Frankfurt Suhrkamp 1972) *The Public Sphere and Experience* trans. Peter Labanyi, Jamie Daniel, Assenka Oksioff (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1993). For a more detailed discussion of that book see my Foreword to the US edition also published in *Public Culture* vol 5 no 2 (1993).

Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge's study, *Public Sphere and Experience*, offers a useful intervention.¹⁶ Like a number of Habermas's recent American critics, Negt and Kluge argue that the ideal of the eighteenth-century public sphere was ideological in its very conception, masking the *de facto* exclusion of substantial social groups (workers, women, servants) and of vital social issues such as the material conditions of production and reproduction (sexuality, childrearing). Likewise, Negt and Kluge insist on the need to understand postliberal and postliterary formations of the public sphere – crucially defined by the photographic and electronic media – in terms other than disintegration and decline.

Negt and Kluge's argument rests on two major moves. One is to call into question the very concept of the public as it is traditionally used:

Public sphere refers to certain *institutions*, establishments, activities (e.g., public force, the press, public opinion, audience [*Publikum*], public relations, streets and squares); but at the same time it is also a general social *horizon of experience* in which what is really or supposedly relevant for all members of society is summarized. In this sense, the public sphere is [on the one hand] a matter of a few professionals (e.g., politicians, editors, functionaries of clubs and associations); on the other hand, it is something that has to do with everyone and which only realizes itself in the heads of human beings, a dimension of their consciousness. [] As long as there is a contradiction between the increased socialization of human beings and the restricted forms of their private lives, the public is simultaneously a real expression of a fundamental social need.¹⁷

17 Negt and Kluge *Öffentlichkeit und Erfahrung* pp. 17–18.

This expansion of the category of the public involves a shift from the formal conditions of communication (free association, free speech, equal participation, polite argument) to the more comprehensive notion of a 'social horizon of experience', grounded in what Negt and Kluge call 'the context of living' (*Lebenszusammenhang*), in material, psychic and social re/production.¹⁸ This horizon includes, emphatically, what the dominant public sphere leaves out, privatizes, or acknowledges only in an abstract and fragmented form. Predicated on inclusion, interconnection and context (*Zusammenhang*), this horizon involves the dialectical imbrication of three distinct layers: one, the experience of re/production under capitalist, alienated conditions; two, the systematic blockage of that experience as a horizon in its own right (that is, the separation of the experiencing subjects from the networks of public expression and representation); and three, as a response to that blockage, imaginative and resistant modes of realigning the sundered chunks of experience, of reality and fantasy, time, history and memory.¹⁹ Negt and Kluge's second move is that they construct this horizon

18 There are interesting contiguities between Negt and Kluge's notion of the context of living and Michel de Certeau's reflections on *The Practice of Everyday Life* trans. Steven Randall (Berkeley: University of California Press 1984).

19 The concept of experience (*Erfahrung*) assumed here is a highly specific one elaborated – in different ways – by Benjamin Bloch, Kracauer and Adorno. See Hansen, Foreword *Public Sphere and Experience* pp. xvi–xix. Benjamin, cinema and experience: The blue flower in

the land of technology *New German Critique* no 490 (1987) pp 179–224 Of mice and ducks Benjamin and Adorno on Disney *South Atlantic Quarterly* vol 92 no 1 (1993) pp 40–1

20 Negt and Kluge adopt this term from Hans Magnus Enzensberger *Constituents of a theory of the media* (1970) trans Stuart Hood in Reinhold Grimm and Bruce Armstrong (eds) *Critical Essays* (New York Continuum 1982) pp 46–76

21 We are interested in what in a world where it is so obvious that catastrophes occur performs the labour that brings about material change Preface *Geschichte und Eigensinn* (Frankfurt Zweitausendeins 1981) p 5 Also see Fredric Jameson On Negt and Kluge *October* no 46 (1988) pp 151–77 and Christopher Pavsek Alexander Kluge and postmodernism or Realism and the public sphere unpublished manuscript

not in analogy to the bourgeois–liberal model, as a presumably autonomous sphere *above* the marketplace and particular interests, but rather trace its contours in the new industrial–commercial publics that no longer pretend to such a separate, independent status. These ‘public spheres of production’ include a variety of contexts, such as ‘factory communities’, spaces of commerce and consumption (restaurants, shopping malls) and, of course, the cinema and other privately owned media of the ‘consciousness industry’²⁰ Lacking legitimation of their own, the industrial–commercial publics enter into alliances with the disintegrating bourgeois public sphere, from opera and masterpiece theatre to political parties and institutions of parliamentary democracy – the latter in turn dependent increasingly on industrial–commercial publicity for its continued operation and power (The idea of an ‘electronic town hall’, which the Clinton administration adopted from billionaire–populist Ross Perot, marks a further step in this direction) But even as the public spheres of production reproduce the ideological, exclusionary mechanisms of the bourgeois prototype, they also aim, for economic reasons, at a maximum of inclusion. Lacking substance of their own, they voraciously absorb, as their fodder or ‘raw material’, contexts of living hitherto bracketed from representation – if only to appropriate, assimilate, abstract, commodify vital areas of social experience, if only to render them obsolete once exhausted and thus again insignificant. It is in their potentially indiscriminating, inclusive grasp, Negt and Kluge argue, that the public spheres of production make visible, at certain junctures, a different function of the public, namely that of a social horizon of experience.

In *Public Sphere and Experience*, Negt and Kluge refer to this emphatically inclusive horizon by the self-consciously anachronistic term ‘proletarian public sphere’, which they see prefigured in alternative and oppositional or counter publics True to the Marxian sense of the term, the ‘proletarian’ public sphere is not an empirical category (and certainly has little to do with traditional labour organizations), but a category of negation in both a critical and a utopian sense, referring to the fragmentation of human labour, existence and experience and its dialectical opposite, the practical negation of existing conditions in their totality In their subsequent collaboration, *History and Obstnacy*, Negt and Kluge locate this utopian possibility in the very process of (alienated) production, in the ‘historical organization of labour power’.²¹ For, while constituted in the process of ‘separation’ (primitive accumulation, division of labour, etc.), labour power contains and reproduces capacities and energies that exceed its realization in/as a commodity – resistance to separation, *Eigensinn* (stubbornness, self-will), self-regulation, fantasy, memory, curiosity, cooperation, feelings and skills in excess of capitalist valorization Whether these energies can

become effective depends on the organization of the public sphere – the extent to which experience is dis/organized from ‘above’ – by the exclusionary standards of high culture or in the interest of profit – or from ‘below’, by the experiencing subjects themselves, on the basis of their context of living. The political task is to create ‘relationality’ (Jameson’s translation of *Zusammenhang*); to make connections between isolated chunks of experience, across segregated domains of work and leisure, fiction and fact, past and present; and to identify points of contiguity among diverse and/or competing partial and counter publics. This politics of relationality is up against the hegemonic form of *Zusammenhang* – the violent pseudo-synthesis of the dominant public sphere, maintained by the alliance of industrial – commercial and bourgeois publicity, which masquerades as *the* public sphere (the subject of the evening news, the ‘nation’)

But this is not an ‘either/or’ argument. Negt and Kluge insist that it is impossible to define or describe *Öffentlichkeit*, or ‘publicness’, in the singular, as if it had any homogeneous substance. Rather, it can always only be understood as an ‘aggregation’ or mixture of different types of public life, corresponding to uneven stages of economic, technical and social organization, ranging from local to global parameters. If Negt and Kluge, for heuristic purposes, distinguish between bourgeois, industrial–commercial and proletarian prototypes, they argue that none of these can be grasped in purity or isolation from each other but only in their mutual imbrication, in specific overlaps, parasitic cohabitations and structural contradictions. (An example of the latter is the contradiction, in industrial–commercial publics, between immediate market interests and pressures of legitimation, which in the case of US cinema can be traced through the history of censorship as well as discourses surrounding particular stars.)

The irrevocably mediated and syncretistic make-up of public life contains a potential for instability, for accidental collisions and opportunities, for unpredictable conjunctures and aleatory developments. It is in the seams and fissures between uneven institutions of public life that alternative alignments can emerge and gain a momentum of their own.²² For the quality of openness (the root of the German word *Öffentlichkeit*) pertains not only to the principle of inclusion – of multiple identities, constituencies, topics – but also to the temporality of the public sphere. Conceptualizing the public as a mixture of competing modes of organizing social experience means thinking of it as a potentially volatile *process*, defined by different speeds and temporal markers. In the conjunctural dynamics of this process, Negt and Kluge discern moments of historical indeterminacy in which change becomes conceivable.

What is the point of thinking about cinema in terms of the public?

²² See Meaghan Morris’s television anecdote (about the 1988 Sydney Birthday Cake Scandal) which offers a graphic example of the conjunctural quality of public life involving a fleeting appropriation or tactical intervention on the part of Australian aborigines (Banality) pp. 28ff.) Morris emphasizes the aspect of *timing* – a seizing of propitious moments – which tallies with Kluge’s concept of public intervention: see in particular his 1974 film on the Frankfurt housing struggle, *In Danger and Dire Distress the Middle of the Road Leads to Death*. The name of his film production company is *kairos* (Greek for propitious moment).

Kluge himself, in his writings, films and video work, has been putting the politics of the public sphere into practice on several levels. Central to his film aesthetics is a concept of montage predicated on relationality – he refers to montage as the ‘morphology of relations’ (*Formenwelt des Zusammenhangs*)²³ – a textual climbing wall designed to encourage the viewer to draw his or her own connections across generic divisions of fiction and documentary, disparate realms and registers of experience. A film is successful in that regard if it manages to activate (rather than merely usurp) what Kluge calls ‘the film in the spectator’s head’, the horizon of experience as instantiated in the subject. The specific connections encouraged by the film respond to the structural blockages of experience perpetuated by the dominant public sphere, in particular, in the case of (West) Germany, the divisions imposed by the ossified programming structures of state-sponsored television.²⁴ But since the monopoly of the latter has been breaking up over the past decade, with a proliferation of private channels (close to forty) approximating the diversification of television in the United States, and in view of the complex and dramatic changes in the German – and European – media landscape, Kluge has reoriented his project. Producing a weekly programme for commercial television, he has been trying to reinvent alternative forms of cinema, a contemporary ‘cinema of attractions’, in the politically compromising, potentially neutralizing environment of advanced electronic publicity.²⁵

Beyond Kluge’s own, still to some extent modernist, film aesthetics, the concept of the public can be mobilized to address a number of key concerns of film and media studies in recent years and to take them a step further. In particular, thinking of the cinema in terms of the public involves an approach that cuts across theoretical and historical, textual and contextual, modes of inquiry. For the cinema functions both as a public sphere of its own, defined by specific relations of representation and reception, and as part of a larger social horizon, defined by other media, by overlapping local, national and global, face-to-face and deterritorialized structures of public life. This dual focus allows us to salvage some of the insights of formalist and psychoanalytic film theory – insights into the workings of cinematic texts and the psychic mechanisms of reception – while changing their paradigmatic status. For even if we situate reception within a specific historical and social framework, and even as the category of the spectator has become problematic, we still need a theoretical understanding of the possible relations between films and viewers, between representation and subjectivity. The questions raised in the name of alternative appropriations of late-capitalist mass culture cannot be answered by empirical reception studies, but need to be discussed in terms of experience (in the emphatic Frankfurt School sense which includes memory and the

²³ Alexander Kluge. On film and the public sphere. trans. Thomas Y. Levin and Miriam Hansen. *New German Critique* nos 24/25 (1981–2) p. 206.

²⁴ See Negt and Kluge. *Öffentlichkeit und Erfahrung* chs 3–5.

²⁵ On Kluge’s television work see Margaret Morse. Ten to eleven television by Alexander Kluge. *1989 American Film Institute Video Festival* (Los Angeles: American Film Institute, 1989) pp. 50–3. Miriam Hansen. Reinventing the nickelodeon: notes on Kluge and early cinema. *October* no. 46 (1988) pp. 178–98. Stuart Liebman. On New German Cinema: art, enlightenment and the public sphere. an interview with Alexander Kluge. *ibid.* pp. 23–59. 30ff. Yvonne Rainer and Ernest Larsen. We are demolition artists: an interview with Alexander Kluge. *The Independent* (June 1989) pp. 18–25. Gertrud Koch. Alexander Kluge’s *Phantom of the Opera*. *New German Critique* no. 49 (1990) pp. 79–88.

unconscious) and the conditions of its possibility, the structures that simultaneously restrict and enable agency, interpretation and self-organization

The turn to (or, to some extent, revival of) more empirically oriented reception studies – and with it the methodological conflation of the actual social viewer and the spectator–subject – has been flanked, especially in Europe, by a nostalgic revival of the cinema as good object. In a recently published anthology of cinephile reminiscences, *Seeing in the Dark*, the editors complain that methods of empirical audience research fail to

fully capture the individual, subjective experience of film going, since they miss out idiosyncratic detail and the personal dreamworld. Measuring applause does not reveal that the movie was memorable for the woman in the third row because the building on screen reminded her of where she went to school and all those childhood memories came flooding back intercut with the film while the auditorium gently shook as an underground train passed beneath and cigarette ash fluttered down from the balcony in the projector beam.²⁶

²⁶ Ian Breakwell and Paul Hammond (eds) *Seeing in the Dark: A Compendium of Cinemagoing* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1990) p. 8

To be sure, empirical audience research misses all these marvellous – and essential – dimensions of moviegoing (as would, for that matter, a Lacanian–Althusserian analysis of spectator positioning). But to reduce these dimensions, in a subjectivist vein, to the merely personal and idiosyncratic means missing out on the more systematic parameters of subjectivity that structure, enable and refract our personal engagement with the film. These include, for instance, the particular cinematic style that set off the viewer's memory; the contrast between the nostalgically evoked local theatre setting (cigarette smoke, high-modern urban technology) and the context of electronic and global postmodernity (the likelihood, for instance, that the viewer in the third row, like the one behind her, may usually watch soap operas), or the fact that the viewer belongs to the social group of women, differentiated according to class, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and generation, which renders her relation to the film shown, probably one version or another of classical cinema, problematic in particular ways. These and other factors structure the horizon of experience that we carry around with us, whether we watch a film alone or collectively. At the same time, that horizon enables and allows us to reflect upon individual experience, indeed, the ability of a film and a viewing situation to trigger personal and collective memory is a measure of its quality as a public sphere.

Thinking of the cinema in terms of the public means reconstructing a horizon of reception not only in terms of sociological determinants, whether pertaining to statistically definable demographic groups or traditional communities, but rather

in terms of multiple and conflicting identities and constituencies. Indeed, the cinema can, at certain junctures, function as a matrix for challenging social positions of identity and otherness, as a catalyst for new forms of community and solidarity. That this may happen on the terrain of late-capitalist consumption, however, does not mean that we should resign ourselves to the range of existing products and modes of production. On the contrary, the category of the public retains a critical, utopian edge, predicated on the ideal of collective self-determination. This perspective mandates not only maintaining critical distinctions with regard to commercially disseminated fare but also envisioning alternative media products and an alternative organization of the relations of representation and reception. In that sense, the concept of the public forestalls the idealization of consumption that has become habitual in some quarters of cultural studies.

Let me return, finally, to early cinema and its specific organization of the relations of reception. I have argued elsewhere that early cinema, and the persistence of early exhibition practices through and even beyond the nickelodeon period, provided the conditions for an alternative public sphere.²⁷ Specifically, it did so as an industrial-commercial public sphere that during a crucial phase of development depended on peripheral social groups (immigrants, recently urbanized working class, women) and thus, willingly or not, catered to people with specific needs, anxieties and fantasies – people whose experience was shaped by traumatic forms of territorial and cultural displacement. The problems posed by the cinema's availability to ethnically diverse, socially unruly and sexually mixed audiences in turn prompted the elaboration of classical modes of narration and spectator positioning. However, rather than taking the industrial promotion of classical cinema (and with it the gentrification of the theatres and streamlining of exhibition practices) as the prime determining factor, I see silent cinema as the site of overlapping, uneven and competing types of publicity. These include the more local spheres of late nineteenth-century popular amusements, new commercial entertainments such as vaudeville and amusement parks, and the emerging sphere of mass-cultural production and distribution. As a composite public sphere, the nickelodeon combined traditions of live performance with an industrially produced commodity circulated on a national and international scale: that is, technologically mediated forms of publicity coexisted with forms of public life predicated on face-to-face relations.

Above all, the conception of film exhibition as a live performance (the incompleteness of the film as circulated commodity) created a margin of improvisation, interpretation and unpredictability which made it a public event in the emphatic sense, a collective horizon in which industrially processed experience could be reappropriated by the experiencing subjects. Films were viewed differently, and were

likely to have a wide range of meanings, depending on the neighbourhood and status of the theatre, on the ethnic and racial background of the habitual audience, on the mixture of gender and generation, on the ambition and skills of the exhibitor and the performing personnel. In Chicago movie theatres catering for African-Americans during the teens and twenties, for instance, the non-filmic programme drew heavily on Southern black performance traditions, and live musical accompaniment was more likely inspired by jazz and blues than by Wagner and Waldteufel.²⁸ Although the films shown in such theatres were mostly white mainstream productions, their meaning was bound to be fractured and ironized in the context of black performance and audience response. I am not saying that such reappropriation actually happened in every single screening or every theatre, nor do I think that empirical methods of research could determine whether it did or not. But the syncretistic make-up of cinematic publicity furnished the *structural conduits* under which this margin could be actualized, under which alternative forms of reception and meaning could gain a momentum of their own.

This dynamic was not limited to the local level but could, because of its mass-cultural distribution, spread across traditional cultural and territorial boundaries. A case in point is the star system, in particular the rise of stars whose marketable personae conflicted with Hollywood's traditional racial and sexual orientation. As studies on individual stars such as Greta Garbo, Rudolph Valentino, Paul Robeson and Mae West suggest, there is never a seamless fit between studio publicity, fan magazines and actual audiences, and the push and pull among these forces have given rise to subcultural formations of reception.²⁹

Today, the frontiers of transgression are drawn differently, and transgressiveness itself has become infinitely more part of the game than it was during the 1920s. Valentino has been vindicated by a long line of androgynous performers, from Elvis through Mick Jagger to Prince and Michael Jackson, and Madonna makes us nostalgic for the aesthetic implantation of perversions afforded by the Production Code. But racism and homophobia still persist and the gains of the women's movement are inseparable from masculist backlash, the anti-abortion campaign and heterosexual violence. Now as then, these issues are negotiated through the most advanced forms of industrial-commercial publicity: then, a cinema and fan culture increasingly submerged into the hegemonic homogeneity of classical mass culture; today, a global electronic media culture that reigns through ceaseless diversification.

To return to my earlier question: how can we compare post-classical and pre-classical modes of spectatorship, early-modern and postmodern forms of mass and consumer culture? Obviously, we are dealing with substantially different stages of historical development,

²⁸ See Mary Carbine, 'The Finest Outside the Loop: motion picture exhibition in Chicago's Black Metropolis, 1905-1928', *Camera Obscura* no. 23 (1990), pp. 9-41; Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, ch. 8.

²⁹ See for instance Jane Gaines, 'The Queen Christina tie ups the convergence of show window and screen', *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* vol. 11 no. 1 (1989), pp. 35-60; Gaylyn Studlar, 'The perils of pleasure? fan magazine discourse as women's commodified culture in the 1920s', *Wide Angle* vol. 13 no. 1 (1991), pp. 6-33; Hansen, *Babe and Babylon*, chs. 11 and 12; Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1986), ch. 2; Pamela Robertson, 'The kinda comedy that imitates me: Mae West's identification with feminist camp', *Cinema Journal* vol. 32 no. 2 (1993), pp. 57-72.

not only on the social and cultural level but, fundamentally, in terms of the organization of capital and the media industries. Nonetheless, from the perspective of the public sphere, a number of affinities suggest themselves. Both periods are characterized by a profound transformation of the relations of cultural representation and reception, by a measure of instability that makes the intervening decades look relatively stable by contrast, anchored in and centred by the classical system. Both stages of media culture vary from the classical norm of controlling reception through a strong diegetic effect, ensured by particular textual strategies and a suppression of the exhibition context; by contrast, pre-classical and post-classical forms of spectatorship give the viewer a greater leeway, for better or for worse, in interacting with the film, a greater awareness of exhibition and cultural intertexts. Both early-modern and postmodern media publics draw on the *periphery* then, on socially marginalized and diverse constituencies within American national culture; today, on massive movements of migration on a global scale which, along with the globalization of media consumption, have irrevocably changed the terms of local and national identity

Early cinema could have developed in a number of ways; it contained 'a number of roads not taken'³⁰ Postmodern media culture seems to be characterized by a similar opening-up of new directions and possibilities, combined, however, with vastly enhanced powers of seduction, manipulation, and destruction. Putting early-modern and postmodern forms of media consumption in a constellation may take away some of the *inevitability* the classical paradigm has acquired both in Hollywood self-promotion and in functionalist film histories.³¹ Drawing a trajectory between these two moments in the history of public life may make classical cinema and the classical mass culture of the New Deal and Cold War eras look more like a historical interlude, a deep-freeze perhaps, than the teleological norm that it has become and that has shaped our approaches to reception. And once we have shifted the frame, even classical cinema may no longer look quite as classical as the critical fixation on its dominant mode suggests.

³⁰ Tom Gunning, 'An unseen energy swallows space: the space in early film and its relation to American avant-garde film' in John L. Fell (ed.), *Film Before Griffith* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1983) p. 366

³¹ See for instance David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press 1985)