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## **Media Culture Field Statement**

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## I. Introduction

“Media culture is [...] a form of techno-culture that merges culture and technology in new forms and configurations, producing new types of societies in which media and technology become organizing principles. Media culture spectacles demonstrate who has power and who is powerless, who is allowed to exercise force and violence, and who is not [...] For those immersed from cradle to grave in a media and consumer society, it is therefore important to learn how to understand, interpret, and criticize its meanings and messages.”  
Douglas Kellner, 1995<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of this field statement is to explore the major theoretical frameworks that constitute the field of media culture, its organizing principles and forms, and the relationship between mass media and various social and cultural formations. This statement also highlights the ways in which media culture simultaneously offers fora and forms for ideological hegemony and assists in the reproduction of power relations, while also providing opportunities for resistance, empowerment, and political and social agency. While it underlines the emergence and subsequent convergence of various media and technological configurations, this statement has two secondary goals: to explore the extent to which media culture interacts with and even impinges upon other institutions in the formations of identities and to ascertain how media culture informs, and articulates itself within, the public sphere. Although my focus is on Western (primarily U.S.) media culture, the growing mobility of new media content (whether produced by media conglomerates or individuals around the world) makes it necessary, at times, to touch upon theories of globalized media culture.

I first provide an historical analysis by surveying the ‘classic,’ historical positions concerning media, mass culture and propaganda that continue to inform contemporary media culture; I then review other analyses of media that offer an important theoretical foundation for a contemporary understanding of media culture. Moreover, I explore how the field has been recently complicated by new and interactive (multi)media applications and technologies. As audience interactivity intensifies and media culture becomes globalized and more mobile, questions around agency, political potential, and its impact on what some consider an emerging global public sphere are becoming increasingly theorized.

I assume, throughout, that the major theoretical frameworks that contribute to our understanding of media culture often arise out of competing social and political forces and are

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<sup>1</sup> Kellner, Douglas. (1995). *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity, and Politics Between the Modern and Post-modern*. New York: Routledge, p. 2.

thus constituted within such tensions. The theories surveyed within this statement do not merely describe or explain media culture, but are also often incorporated into the fabric of media culture, as I will further elaborate upon in following sections. Though this field statement cannot thoroughly articulate all the significant disciplinary perspectives and theoretical contributions that constitute 'media culture,' it does survey the major tensions, connections, and relationships between mass media, its technologies, and the formation of identities, publics, and individual and mass subjects. I also highlight the importance of cultural studies as a primary mode of inquiry, as its interdisciplinarity and attention to the meanings and practices of everyday life make cultural studies best equipped to address the social and political issues inherent within (multi)media culture.

## II. Theoretical Foundations: Mass Media and Media Society

Contemporary theories of mass culture are heavily indebted to early twentieth-century intellectual debates about mass media and mass society, primarily those of the Frankfurt School<sup>2</sup>, and respond to these earlier theoretical frameworks. Therefore, in order to understand the discourse of contemporary (new) media culture, one must survey earlier theories that address the rise of mass media production, distribution and consumption. Additionally, because these analyses underscore the early intersections among technology, media, and culture, they provide an important theoretical foundation for our understanding of technology as a medium of social organization. I first want to briefly note, however, that other critiques of mass society and mass media surfaced and echoed many of the concerns of the Frankfurt School theorists (and to which later theorists would respond). From Spain, for instance, Jose Ortega y Gasset, in *The Revolt of the Masses* (1930), charged that mass education combined with mass culture threatens individual autonomy and thus agency. Echoing many of Adorno and Horkheimer's critiques, British theorist F.R. Leavis, in *Mass Civilization and Minority Culture* (1930) and *Culture and Environment* (1933; co-written with Denys Thompson), argued that the mass media of the twentieth century offered a diversion from real social issues and an increasing decline in cultural and social values. Many of these theories, however, often reduced culture to commodities or instruments of ruling class domination.

I therefore focus what have become 'classic' historical positions articulated most significantly in the Frankfurt School tradition, by the school's primary theorists and interlocutors, such as Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Leo Löwenthal, Ernst Bloch, Siegfried Kracauer, Herbert Marcuse, Bertolt Brecht, and Walter Benjamin. Generating some of the earliest scholarship that addressed the intersections of technology and culture, mass society, communication, and the effects of mass culture on social organization and the working classes, these German theorists also offered an early model of critical cultural studies. While their work was not reflective of any one particular theoretical paradigm, they combined theories of Marxist political economy, philosophy and critical sociology to address their concerns about the industrialization, commodification, and standardization of culture. In many ways, the Frankfurt School's connection with Marxism is notably underscored by an overall perception of the project

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<sup>2</sup> Initially named the *Institut für Sozialforschung* in Frankfurt, Germany.

of Enlightenment as a false promise—a concern that is perhaps best exemplified by Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (2002 [1944]).

Coming from a common Hegelian background, in which the concept of social totality is key<sup>3</sup>, these theorists also wrote within an era of rapidly increasing urban populations, mass communication and the rise of fascism and Nazism in Europe. In particular, capitalist monopolies and an emerging ‘mass society’<sup>4</sup> drove these theorists to interrogate the processes of what Adorno and Horkheimer (1972 [1947]) refer to as the “culture industry,” a focus that grew more intense as many moved into the United States, with its burgeoning mass media culture. Approaching mass culture as arising from ideological and material sources, they also all assessed the impact of mass culture on the political public and social spheres.

One of the primary debates revolved around the dominative versus liberatory potential of mass communication and culture. Though these German theorists all worked primarily from a Marxist theoretical framework and were inclined to perceive the mass cultural industry as engendering varying forms of social control, their perspectives about audience and the public’s agency differed. For Adorno, Marcuse, and Horkheimer, for instance, mass culture provided a primary resource for bourgeois control and worked to diffuse individualism and oppositional consciousness; audiences of mass culture, these theorists argued, believe they are happy when consuming popular cultural narratives, but this happiness is illusory and a product of false consciousness. Brecht, Benjamin, Bloch, and Kracauer, on the other hand, saw the revolutionary potential within mass culture; radio and film, for instance, could be used to educate the working class about its oppression and provide a potentially powerful, wide-reaching force for revolution.

One of the earliest analyses of mass culture came from Herbert Marcuse (1941), who argued that mass media technologies organize and perpetuate social relationships, habituate audiences to conform to dominant narratives, and are thus instruments of domination and control (414). Adorno and Horkheimer (2002 [1947]) followed up with an equally scathing critique of mass culture, arguing that audiences fall victim to commodity fetishism and alienation. Later, in *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse (2002 [1964]) insisted that mass media and culture, driven by

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3 Hegel, G. W. F. (1967). *Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, London: Oxford University Press, pp. 216-24. Hegel viewed the social totality as one in which no individual held a privileged place.

4 Although there are many different accounts of what the term “mass society” refers to, with varying emphases on industrial, non-bourgeoisie populations, the ‘body politic,’ mob rule or the majority, most Frankfurt school theorists perceived mass society through a Marxist framework—as a society of alienated workers under the sway of a culture industry that was driven by the logic of capitalism.

capitalism, creates false needs, leads to one-dimensional thinking and behavior, and drains individuals of their “independence of thought, autonomy, and the right to political opposition” (4). Marcuse, Adorno and Horkheimer stood most in contrast to Ernst Bloch, who argued for the potentially liberatory effects of hope, inherent within the content of most mass cultural texts. Benjamin, loosely affiliated with the Frankfurt school and positioned somewhere in the middle, echoed Adorno and Horkheimer’s observations that mass culture depreciates the value and quality of original art, but argued this process has the potential to develop more critical audiences; he believed that technologies of mass culture can be appropriated in such a way as to enhance the possibility of a democratic class-consciousness.

In “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” Adorno and Horkheimer (2000 [1944]) argued that art and culture have been subsumed by capitalist industry; mass media changed the modes of reception for ‘high’ art and conflated it with popular culture, to the detriment of both. Subsumed into dominant, mass-produced ideologies, art no longer serves a critical or socially valuable function, because the producers of mass culture have synthesized all of culture for their audiences. Film, for instance, leaves no room for imagination or contemplation; no independent thought is required from audiences because producers prescribe every reaction. Furthermore, as culture becomes increasingly industrialized, they argued, it necessarily becomes standardized; therefore, designed toward repetition and adhering to a formula in order to reach larger audiences, the narrative templates that are manufactured never deliver the real pleasure or enjoyment that they seem to promise, but rather serve as a cultural scripts that model acceptable social behavior. The culture industry, they insisted, desensitizes and thwarts resistance to the dominant culture by providing pleasurable (though illusory) stimuli, holding out the promise of independence and individual achievement through such narratives of pleasure and the ‘good life.’

At best, Adorno and Horkheimer suggested, mass media offer momentary distractions—repression, rather than sublimation, by stimulating audiences’ appetite for a better life by repeatedly dangling objects of desire, stories of escape and paradise, which only serve to further promote a resignation to the capitalist system by domesticating and making docile the working class. Unquestioning and uncritical audiences thus become passive recipients of dominant ideologies and vulnerable to mass deception. But not conforming to mass media standardization, argued Adorno and Horkheimer, means rendering oneself socially and economically powerless

within the larger system; thus, conformity becomes a matter of survival. Meanwhile, the relations of production extend into leisure time, making mass media pervasive and inescapable, perpetuating the work of industrial domination, and compelling obedience to the social hierarchy. The mass audience, they insisted, therefore becomes part of the system, not just a reason for its existence.

Further elaborating on audience culpability and the conflation of 'high' and 'low' art in his essay, "On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening," Adorno (1982) argued that the rise of mass culture (in this instance exemplified by music) is indicative of a massive regression of both listening and aesthetic appreciation. The appropriation of classical works by the commodification of popular music, he argued, liquidates the seriousness, quality, and autonomy of high culture, while destroying the rebelliousness and political potential of popular culture. Adorno claimed that the social preference for "light music" is based more on familiarity (what is popular) rather than quality; thus, there exists a disjunction between the quality of a piece of work and its over-valuation and fetishization. Immersed within the processes of commercialization, both music producers and listeners reinforce this identification with the fetish; thus, a regression of listening occurs and audiences resign themselves to whatever is made available, surrender their freedom of choice, and abandon aesthetic appreciation and critical listening skills. Adorno's thesis on music reiterated previously articulated concerns about the culture industry and the inhibition of conscious and autonomous thinking.

While Adorno always insisted upon a degree of audience culpability, he argued that media industries and the capitalist system manipulated audiences into an obedience of the social hierarchy. In a later article, reflecting upon "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," Adorno (1975) explained that he and Horkheimer purposely replaced the term "mass culture" with "culture industry" in order to refute the popular myth that mass culture was something that arose from the masses; they sought rather to emphasize the manufacturing of culture by capitalist monopolies. Adorno (2003) also argued, in "The Schema of Mass Culture," that mass culture degenerates into nothing more than a system of signs. Elaborating upon Marx's concept of the "social hieroglyph," Adorno reiterated the fetishistic quality of mass culture, via this a schema of signification, and argued that the historical truth of reification is hidden within this process. Exacerbated by the iconicity of visual images and media, he insisted, mass culture

becomes regressive and masks the true material conditions of production and alienation. The products of mass culture, he concluded, were nothing but pure commodities, and each product became its own advertisement; rather than authoring culture, mass cultural consumers were becoming increasingly implicated within the capitalist system that drives its production.

Benjamin, on the other hand, argued that mass produced art had the potential to engage larger numbers of people politically, though whether such politics actually would be progressive was unclear. While Benjamin agreed that the mass production of culture demolishes uniqueness (or what he refers to as its “aura”), contrary to Adorno and Horkheimer, he believed that this process was emancipatory. Responding in great part to what he viewed as an increasing aesthetic romanticization of war, most clearly evidenced by the Italian Futurists, Benjamin writes “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”<sup>5</sup> in the hope that he can offer a revolutionary politics of art (1968 [1936]: 218). Through the process of mechanical reproduction, he argued, the aura of the original dies and is relegated to some mythological place, which leaves a gap for people to create their own myths through aesthetic interpretation and thus open up the work to politicization.

Benjamin argued that the mechanical reproduction of culture has political implications because it brings the original work of art in reproduced form to the public, challenging the hierarchy between high and low art and private and public. Because mechanically reproduced art breaks down the original’s aura and authenticity, a work of art that was exclusively reserved for the elite can now be viewed by the working class. As a result, working-class people have new opportunities to appreciate art and use it for their political and social benefit. And yet, within mass production, the possibility for deception and distraction also arises; like Adorno, Marcuse, and Horkheimer, Benjamin also was concerned most about the possibility of fascistic appropriation of mechanical reproductions, even though he did not assume this to be an inevitable outcome. Brecht, who worked with Benjamin on films and wrote radio plays, similarly believed that media could be useful for social progress; and both called for a reform of media

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<sup>5</sup> The original essay was first published in 1936 in *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* (*Journal for Social Research*) as “Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit.”

technology and broadcasting apparatus to allow for more interactive<sup>6</sup> and politically enlightened and engaged communication.<sup>7</sup>

Although Ernst Bloch certainly recognized the ideological implications of mass and popular culture, in contrast to Adorno and Horkheimer's critiques of ideology, Bloch neither perceived mass culture as merely disseminating dominant ideologies to passive audiences, nor did he denounce all ideology as false consciousness. Instead, Bloch recognized both the emancipatory and illusory qualities of utopian elements in all living ideologies<sup>8</sup>, and thus provided perhaps a more sophisticated analysis of media culture. For Bloch, every cultural expression was a product of ideology, but with both deceptive and emancipatory potential, a position that echoed Benjamin's hopeful, though somewhat cautious view of mass culture's revolutionary potential. Fascist ideology, Bloch insisted, is not simply a tool for mass deception, as Adorno and Horkheimer claimed, but a "fragment of an old and romantic antagonism to capitalism, derived from deprivations in contemporary life, with a longing for a vague 'other.'"<sup>9</sup> Ideology, Bloch suggested, is thus two-sided, or "Janus-faced," capable of mystification, falsification, manipulation and domination, but also contains a utopian surplus or residue that can be used for liberatory and revolutionary social discourse and critique. Hope is not simply contemplative, he argued, but participatory; thus, the extension of his theories to mass culture suggest the existence of a certain agency on the part of audiences to harness and use these (albeit ideologically-inclined) narratives to their benefit under the right material and historical conditions.

Siegfried Kracauer, a mentor of Adorno and working alongside Benjamin and Bloch in the mid-1920s, also critiqued mass culture, but for Kracauer, the truth of cultural phenomena is less ambiguous or mysterious and can be found in society's "surface-level expressions," or the articulations of daily life (1995: 75-76). For Kracauer, the "truth" or meaning of a particular cultural expression was not hidden, awaiting theoretical excavation, but was rather available (though not necessarily always transparent) to all. By looking at the cultural expression itself, one can see how the façades of power structures communicate meaning; he used the example of

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<sup>6</sup> According to Marc Silberman (2000), Brecht's call for a more interactive two-way or multiple mode of communication in broadcasting anticipated the Internet.

<sup>7</sup> See "The Artist as Producer," in Benjamin, Walter (1999). *Collected Writings, Volume II*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press & Silberman, Marc (2000) *Bertolt Brecht on Film and Radio*. London: Methuen.

<sup>8</sup> By "living ideologies," Bloch refers not just to the ideologies revealed through Marxist critique, theoretical texts and political discourse, but ideologies that arise out of everyday life and popular culture.

<sup>9</sup> Ernst Bloch, *Erbschaft*, quoted in Anson Rabinbach, "Ernst Bloch's *Heritage of Our Time* and the Theory of Fascism," *New German Critique*, no. 11 (Spring 1977): 7.

the Tiller Girls' performance, in which one need only to "look" to learn that these "girl clusters" are merely a spectacle—an ornament of mass bodies that lacks any significant content, but reveals the real social relations of the system of mass consumption and production (75-76). The objectification of their bodies into a mass ornamental display thus becomes, within the capitalist system of entertainment, empty of content, and self-referential.

### III. Critical Media Theories

One particularly influential strand of media studies emerged from theorists affiliated with the Birmingham School<sup>10</sup> in the 1960s and 70s. Scholars such as Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, E.P. Thompson, and Stuart Hall, building upon Gramsci's theory of hegemony, situated their analyses within an interdisciplinary framework that helped them to interrogate the ways in which media culture serves to reproduce hegemony or, conversely, offers a resistance to dominant, ideological forces. While their analyses were in part anticipated by Frankfurt School theorists and criticized for being somewhat optimistically naïve (Schiller 1989), these scholars focused on theories of audience reception, interpretation and agency, as well as analyses of media content that challenged dominant cultural narratives.

Theorists of the Birmingham School resisted the deterministic concept that power relations are merely imposed or forced upon the lower classes; they rather recognized an often unconscious complicity—wherein groups of people, to varying degrees, become co-authors of their own repression. As Gramsci theorized, through the manufacturing of consent, the values of the bourgeoisie became the 'common sense' values of all, creating, in turn, a hegemonic culture. The working-class identified their own good with the good of the bourgeoisie and helped to *maintain* the status quo rather than offering any substantial resistance. Locating more examples of individual and working-class agency than Frankfurt School theorists, Birmingham scholars also offered new and arguably more practical forms of praxis. However, one of the criticisms of the Birmingham School (Aronowitz 1993) is that most of them ignored high culture within their fields of inquiry, dismissing it out of hand as elitist. Nevertheless, the Birmingham School theorists sought to blur the boundaries between high and low culture, as opposed to the Frankfurt school theorists who highlighted the distinction between the two.

The founder of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, Richard Hoggart, published what would become one of the first pieces of scholarship that set the tradition for future Birmingham School interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks with *The Uses of Literacy* (1957); in this text, Hoggart explored the tension between working-class culture and the rise of mass media and investigated how popular cultural texts are part of the daily lived experiences of the working class. Hoggart argued that mass culture damaged and sometimes replaced more

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<sup>10</sup> Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in England, 1964-2002.

authentic local cultures. Unlike some of the Frankfurt School critiques, Hoggart did not deride popular culture as a lower form of culture—with its implicit connection to the moral depravity of the proletariat—that destroys a more valuable ‘high’ culture. Rather, he argued that the working-class deserves popular cultural narratives that offer more intellectual and moral substance; the working-class, he suggested, need not simply to be entertained or offered an “escape” from daily life (183), but rather an intensification of it—cultural narratives that show the ways in which daily life is interesting and compelling (86). Although Hoggart’s book has since been criticized for its working-class sentimentality, neglect of issues of production, and cultural pessimism, it was also one of the first pieces of scholarship that argued for the cultural rights of the working class.

Shortly thereafter, Raymond Williams (1983 [1958]) argued that mass culture holds promise for participatory democracy *because* of its broad accessibility and tendency to more accurately reflect and address issues of everyday life. Popular culture provides access to what Williams referred to as “structures of feeling,” or the ways in which lived culture—the totality of one’s impressions of her culture—are experienced and perceived, both subjectively and systematically, within any given time and place and reflecting a larger, common set of cultural perceptions and experiences. Perhaps Williams’ most significant contribution to the study of media culture comes from *Communications* (1962) and *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (1974), in which he attempted to locate institutionalized media forms that could help sustain a democratic system of communication. Responding in part to previous concerns about the impact of the “mass” and mass media on democracy and the perceived decline of social and cultural values, Williams pointed out that while the word “mass” became synonymous with “mob” and its accompanying characteristics of “gullibility, fickleness, herd-prejudice” and bad taste (297), “there are in fact no masses; there are only ways of seeing people as masses” (300). The “mass,” Williams thus implied, was a social construction. Williams drew this distinction in order to address previous “top-down” theories of mass culture that assumed audiences were passive receptacles of media texts and their accompanying ideologies. Instead, Williams proposed that communication media be democratized by taking them out of the hands of commercial entities and making them accessible to the public, to allow previously excluded perspectives and lived experiences to be heard.

Around the same time, Marshall McLuhan, author of *The Gutenberg Galaxy: the Making of Typographic Man* (1962), *Understanding Media* (2001 [1964]), and *The Medium is the Message*<sup>11</sup> (2005 [1967]), argued that analyses of media are too focused on content (the supposed “messages” delivered) and not enough on the medium itself, which he defines, in *Understanding Media*, as an “extension of ourselves” or any form of new technology (9). Historically, he suggested, communication technologies and their processes have determined the ways in which society and culture have developed; people do not simply use technologies, but are rather reinvented by them. More concerned with the phenomenological effect of media culture, as opposed to either the ideological effects of its messages or issues of political economy, McLuhan thus famously declares that “the medium is message” (2005 [1967]: 9).

Like the Birmingham theorists, McLuhan saw the emancipatory and democratic potential of the new media, but located that potential within the technologies—for their ability to extend our senses and experiences (thus our power) out into the world, rather than within the content. The message (or content) of media, he argued, is not as important as the medium through which one receives it. McLuhan did not dismiss the importance of content altogether, but rather argued that the medium significantly impacts how one understands or perceives the meaning of the message. Technologies, he insisted, are akin to natural resources that people individually and collectively should use to the benefit of society—better connecting them to each other and the world in which they live. Mechanical multiples of the same text created a public, and the printing press, McLuhan argued, promoted individualism and linearity and led to the creation of nationalism and the standardization of culture. New media (such as television and radio) bring about and sustain interaction, instantaneity, and simultaneity, and abolish spatial separation—extending human communications and opening up a new era of global communications. Returning frequently to the imaginary of a “global village,” McLuhan also suggested that this era of new media has allowed us to return to a primordial structure of “tribal emotions” from which previous centuries of literacy had divorced us (63). It is as if McLuhan heralded this era of media as a return to some primitive way of being and living together in community that was lost as a

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<sup>11</sup> According to Dr. Eric McLuhan, Marshall McLuhan’s eldest son, the book’s title, which was originally supposed to play off of McLuhan’s famous phrase, “The medium is the message,” a concept that McLuhan first introduced in his book, *Understanding Media*, was accidentally published as *The Medium is the Massage*. McLuhan is purported to have said that he preferred the typesetting mistake because it offered a number of puns (on “message,” “mess age,” and “mass age”), but also offered a metaphor for the way in which McLuhan describes media’s impact on the human sensorium. See: <http://marshallmcluhan.com/common-questions/>.

result of the printed press. Rather boldly, he (2005 [1967]) also asserted that television, favoring as it does visual culture, has led to the abolishment of writing and discussed television as some now describe virtual reality, as “an extension of the sense of active, exploratory touch, which involves all the senses simultaneously, rather than that of sight alone” (125). Compared to virtual reality technologies (and particularly the more advanced technologies), television now appears to be a rather flat and mundane medium; but for McLuhan, television was interactive and demanded participation.

While his predictions were, in many regards, somewhat prescient of the technologies to be developed, McLuhan’s views have been perceived by many theorists as universalizing, utopian, and technologically determinant, reducing the development and uses of technologies to social events. Williams, for instance, refuted the argument that technology creates social change or that technology is symptomatic of particular social movements. In “Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory” (1991 [1973]), Williams broke down the concept of *determinism*<sup>12</sup>, as inherited from a theological account of an external cause that predicts, prefigures, and/or controls activity (such as McLuhan seemed to suggest happens with media technologies), and differentiates this from social practices and experiences of *determination*—the setting of limits and the exertion of pressures by any number of real factors<sup>13</sup>, which never fully control or predict any particular outcome. The relationship between the base and superstructure, Williams argued, is neither static nor fixed, but complicated, as is the concept of determination; and theorizing how culture either reflects or reproduces the economic forces of the base does not help explain the complexities of culture or the political economy thereof. Moreover, he argued that technological determinism is dangerous because it assumes that people lack the power to shape new media or resist its potential hegemonic impact. Instead, he suggested that one must necessarily approach an analysis of technological advancement as a process, rather than a condition or fixed state—as an evolutionary, rather than a revolutionary, force.

In *Television Technology and Cultural Form* (2003 [1975]), Williams also asserted the importance of content, in contrast to McLuhan, and argued that media texts contribute to the

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12 Technological determinism refers to the belief that new technologies have an autonomous and intrinsic power to shape and transform a society.

13 “Real factors” can refer to any number of external or internal forces (technological, cultural, social, political, economic, etc.) that have an impact on social experiences and practices, but do not determine or predict any specific cause and effect relationship; thus, real factors could include anything from the size and power of a corporation or availability of media content to the cost of television sets. All of these factors can impact media experiences and practices, in any number of ways, but none could be said to have any specific or absolute effect.

social construction of our reality.<sup>14</sup> Relying significantly on the work of Herbert Schiller<sup>15</sup>, Williams explored how television, specifically, had been integrated into various bureaucratic frameworks and used to promote foreign and national policy goals. Because Williams recognized the ways in which media are inextricably linked to national and commercial institutions, and the development of such technologies is guided by political and economic goals—not primarily social needs—he called for its democratization. Taking quite the opposite stance of McLuhan, Williams warned that if we do not open access to media production, these technologies will be seized by a handful of corporations, offering few programmatic choices and making media even more deeply entrenched in state and commercial ideologies. Williams has been criticized, however, for having a fairly naïve view of media—as if media technologies and programming can simply be divvied up among public entities that would afford equal access to all.

The democratic potential of media continued to be a major concern for Birmingham scholars, and counter-hegemonic possibilities of resistance were located primarily within popular and counter-cultural narratives. In *The Popular Arts* (1965), for instance, Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel highlighted the value of popular culture as a resistant force to hegemony, in part reinforced by their refusal (at least in theory) to measure popular culture against high culture. Hall and Whannel also suggested that it was unproductive to compare “high” and “low” cultural content (or to even measure it as such), because different types of art evoke different responses. And yet, although they challenged the distinctions between the notion of high art as “good” and low art as “bad,” their categorization of popular art as being located somewhere between folk art and mass art drew new distinctions that re-emphasized, rather than challenged, previous notions of mass culture as formulaic and least aesthetic. Thus, while they argued that new media challenge “the established hierarchies of culture,” they also seem to have created new hierarchies in their discussions of the various kinds and categories of culture and their attempts to develop new critical methods for evaluating various media (1965: 78). Nevertheless, by placing emphasis on individual pleasure derived from cultural texts, they also lent credibility to the study of

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<sup>14</sup> Additionally, Williams (2003 [1975]) introduces the concept of “televisual flow,” a term he uses to describe the flow that occurs from program to commercial to previews and back to the program. Rather than looking only at the actual program, Williams suggests that a proper analysis of a media text should take place by looking holistically at this narrative flow, which represents “the flow of meanings and values of a specific culture” (118).

<sup>15</sup> See Schiller, Herbert (1992 [1969]), *Mass Communication and American Empire*, in which Schiller highlights his concern with conglomerate control of the media and the use of media by policy makers to promote various agendas.

audience pleasure and agency, anticipating important subsequent theoretical developments within the fields of media and cultural studies.

One of the key issues in determining the democratic potential of media, as highlighted by both Frankfurt and Birmingham theorists, lies within the relationship between producer, text, and receiver or audience. While Frankfurt theorists asserted that the power lay primarily in the hands of the producer, Birmingham theorists, as previously noted, sought to locate audience agency and resistance of hegemonic narratives. Hall became particularly influential in audience studies with his analysis of mass media's role in the formation of public opinion. In his articles "Encoding/Decoding" (1993 [1973]) and "Deconstructing the Popular" (1981), Hall argued that while mass media has the ability to shape and reinforce hegemony, the audience also has the power to resist it. Like Williams, Hall firmly rejected the notion that audiences are merely passive recipients of cultural texts and accompanying messages, but argued that they are actively involved in the negotiation of meaning.

Media messages, Hall argued in "Encoding/Decoding," (1993 [1973]) operate through the discursive forms of codes, which helps to then explain how cultural products are perceived differently within different cultural contexts—the decoding of codes within larger systems of signs. Rejecting the linear model of source → message → receiver (characteristic of Frankfurt critiques), Hall proposed that the messages that audiences receive could follow any one of three possible trajectories: a *dominant or hegemonic reading*, wherein the reader or audience member relates to the code and accepts its (purposefully or not) intended meaning; a *negotiated reading*, wherein the reader accepts, broadly, the codes, but will sometimes resist parts of it or read it in such a way as to adapt her own context to the code; or an *oppositional or counter-hegemonic reading*, in which a reader understands the preferred reading, but because the text puts her in opposition to it, she rejects this meaning and constructs an alternative interpretation. Thus, while these communicative moments are all part of the same system, they also act independently of one another and within specific contexts. The meaning of a cultural text, Hall argued, then lies somewhere between the producer's encoding and the consumer's decoding, and audiences often produce their own meanings in ways that are oppositional to dominant ideological narratives. Media texts therefore do not simply reinforce dominant ideologies, but constitute ideological battle grounds.

Hall's audience reception theory became quite influential for future media culture theorists, as it placed more emphasis on the role of audience agency and individual meaning-making than had previously been the case. Some theorists, however, challenged Hall's concept of preferred reading, or how the producer-encoder would prefer one interpret a text. In response to Hall's theory, for instance, Shaun Moores (1993) raised the question of how one even can establish a 'preferred' reading or know if the dominant code has been located (28). Hall's framework, he suggested, can also indicate that the latent meaning of a message is encoded in the dominant code—an assumption that can reify the medium and potentially overlook significant conflicts within the text. Furthermore, as Robert Stam (2000) suggested, such a reductive reading could also lead to an essentialization of readers (as "counter-hegemonic" for instance), when readers' experiences are, rather, discursively discontinuous, fragmented, shifting, full of contradictory responses, and even "schizophrenic" (233). Thus, he asserted, neither the spectator nor the text is ever pre-constituted or static; rather all of the factors involved—from text, discourse, history and the medium—are always fluid and engaged within an "endless dialogical process" (231). For the Birmingham theorists, the spectator thus became increasingly perceived as active, critical participants in the production of meaning, rather than merely interpellated.

Richard Dyer (1977), working concurrently with the Birmingham theorists though not affiliated with them, reiterated the concept of audience participation in meaning-making when he argued that people's attractions to entertainment or a particular cultural text are not merely in response to some ideological manipulation, but an expression of their real needs and desires for a better life. Additionally, he contended, the narratives produced are not simply a reiteration or reproduction of dominant ideologies of the ruling classes, but are also largely (co)defined by the entertainers themselves. And although the entertainment industry inevitably responds to capitalist goals, its narratives also sometimes provide alternatives *to* capitalism (279). The entertainment industry had the power to not only evoke dreams of a better society, Dyer argued, but also nurture the struggle for upward mobility and social change; entertainment does not simply provide people with what they want, it also defines those wants. The utopian characteristics of entertainment, Dyer insisted, are often assumed to provide the audience with images of something better (than their current reality) to escape into; but entertainment does not merely reproduce models of utopianism, but rather utopian possibilities are to be glimpsed in the feelings that it engenders. To embody these feelings, entertainment uses both representational

(i.e. narratives and characters) and non-representational (i.e. color, lighting, and editing) signs. But non-representational qualities, he added, do not simply produce feelings; emotions, too, are coded, and one has to learn what emotion is embodied in which element before knowing how to respond (274). Problematically, Dyer pointed out, non-representational forms tend to be treated as a function of the representational, rather than studied in their own right; thus, theorists need to place more emphasis on cultural and historical perspectives (context) to better understand how these utopian visions function. Furthermore, to be effective (in the Bloch sense of hope and utopian dreams), Dyer argued, entertainment must respond to the real experiences of the audience; but to do so, it would also have to illuminate the gap between what is (reality) and what could be (dreams of a better life) for all, not just the majority most often represented. In whatever ways entertainment responds to society's desires for utopian visions, Dyer argued, it also defines the limits of these needs by choosing what needs it will address; in the process, class, race, sexual caste, and other minority issues are not typically given validity as social problems to be addressed by those in control of media.

Also working concurrently with the Birmingham School were French theorists, Guy Debord and Jean Baudrillard<sup>16</sup>. These theorists, however, while not altogether a part of any particular "school" of thought, were much less optimistic than the Birmingham theorists when it came to audience agency. Furthermore, while Birmingham scholars sought to problematize the "top-down" theories of communication, Debord and Baudrillard theorized an increasing loss of genuine communication, social interaction, and political engagement. Debord (1967), for instance, argued that cultural hegemony is gained through the metamorphosis of the consumer and mass media into what he calls the "society of the spectacle." As opposed to Bloch and Jameson, both of whom suggested that dreaming is a necessary (albeit often ideologically saturated) first step towards praxis, Debord insisted that the spectacle is a "bad dream" (13). Echoing Marx's theory of commodity fetishism and Frankfurt School critiques of the culture industry, in Debord's account of the spectacle, the images produced by consumer society become a replacement for lived experience. Debord likened the spectacle to a sort of "permanent opium war," in which people, already alienated from their labor, are daily saturated with images, rendering them passive and depoliticized (22). Separated, as he argued they are from the means

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<sup>16</sup> French theorists, Paul Virilio, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari, were also working alongside Debord and Baudrillard, but I will discuss these theorists in the section on new media, since they more significantly impacted theories of new media.

of image production, the masses are forced into a passive acceptance of the power relations that undergird existing social relations. Additionally (and here echoing Adorno and Horkheimer), what is perceived to be liberation from work (a leisure activity) is, in reality, a reproduction of consumerist mass media culture; and technology, he argued, which is supposedly designed to eliminate or reduce work, rather has become the preservation of labor as a commodity.

Furthermore, this “spectacle” of images, Debord argued, is detached from all aspects of life and merges into one huge stream of fragmented views of reality, creating a “*separate pseudo-world*” that cannot be lived, but merely looked at (7). But the spectacle is not just a collection of images, he emphasized, but rather *constitutes* a social relationship between people that is mediated by these images; the spectacle, therefore, is not a visual illusion created by mass media, but a “world-view” that has materialized. The spectacle presents itself *as* life, Debord argued, and offers a means of unification that is illusory, a “domain of delusion and false consciousness;” an active and subjective power is thus ascribed to fetishized commodities, while the subject is objectified by the spectacle (7). And yet, this level of commodification essentially renders false consciousness obsolete because ideology, itself, becomes materialized.

Whereas Debord was still working within Marxist theoretical frameworks, making explicit references to the ways in which mass media and the spectacle alienated people from each other, their work, and their real material conditions of production, Baudrillard disregarded the concepts of alienation and reification and instead theorized a society so saturated with media, information, technologies and consumer culture that the only real exchange that occurs is at the level of information, signs, and images. Additionally, while Baudrillard’s earlier work (2005 [1967]) criticized McLuhan’s technological idealism and determinism and pointed out his failure to put media in its historical and social context, he later agreed with the general principle of McLuhan’s theory of the medium as the message. Baudrillard, however, asserted that media were not merely technological, nor had an inherent technological structure as McLuhan argued, and changing or advancing the technology will not automatically create social change. And contrary to McLuhan’s argument that the media transport people deeper into real lived experiences, Baudrillard argued that the media initiate a process of semiotic distancing. Baudrillard insisted that media serve a social function, but that the model of transmitter-message-receiver, a model that underlies all communication media, does not allow for true exchange and therefore

forecloses any possibility of reciprocity. The only alternative to this model, he suggested, is that of collaborative production that will resist the typical model of producers and consumers.

In “Simulacra and Simulations” (1985) and *The Ecstasy of Communication* (1987), Baudrillard argued that commodities and events in the public sphere are transformed into sign value, a vague semiotic system of abstract signifiers that are consumed for their social value and become indicative of perceived prestige and power. According to Baudrillard, all of life—political, social, cultural, economic—is overly explicit, ecstatic and obscene in its visibility and over-transparency and governed by this mode of simulation, a mediated process in which the real is replaced with simulacra, without depth, referents, or origins. Additionally, Baudrillard argued, divisions and boundaries lose distinction and power and become characterized, rather, by de-differentiation or a sort of implosion of power, class, social distinctions and high and low culture. According to Baudrillard, while people are not totally out of touch with reality, they exist in a state of schizophrenia, a constant state of confusion produced by a media saturated world—or what he termed the “ecstasy of communication.”

Whereas previously media were theorized as reflecting or representing real lived experiences or social realities (whether accurately or not), in Baudrillard’s framework the media became “hyperreal,” or more real than real. As Baudrillard insisted, people seek to flee from the banality of everyday life by pursuing ecstasies of hyperreality within the experiences produced by media technologies. In this hyperreal world, however, subjectivities are lost and fragmented, politics become obsolete and irrelevant, and neither can be properly analyzed through previous theoretical frameworks. Baudrillard argued new media *constitute* a hyperreality, in which the real is subordinated to a sort of hyper-representation, thus distinguishing, in the process, the real itself. In a world saturated by such hyperreality, media obliterates meaning – the result, he argued, is the dissolution of all meaning and content into a sort of meaningless noise. Thus Baudrillard implied that media are, in effect, not mediating (for there is nothing left to meditate), but rather implode the reality they are supposedly trying to represent. And because both the media and its audiences strip media and mass communications of any meaning, he suggested, there is no reason to perform ideological critiques of the media.

According to Baudrillard (and in distinction to McLuhan who theorized the media as an extension and exteriorization of humans), people interiorize media transmissions to the point of obliteration, not just of meaning, but also the distinction between private and public and interior

and exterior space. Media space replaces these other spaces, in the minds of the viewers. By the time Baudrillard wrote "Requiem for the Media" (2003 [1972]), he began to move away from Marxist theory and more thoroughly assimilate McLuhan's technological determinism into his own theoretical framework, though with an increasing pessimism for media technology's future. Baudrillard increasingly interpreted media as simply technological machines or forms that produced irrelevant and insignificant content. The function of mass media, according to Baudrillard, was to *prevent* audience response and ensnare individuals in a world of simulacra where they are not only then unable to distinguish between reality and the spectacle, but also led privilege the spectacle over reality. Baudrillard thus significantly theorized a reversal of the relationship between representation and reality in media theory and suggested that the masses further erode the delineation between representation and the real by absorbing the spectacle and neutralizing (or resisting) any meaning. Baudrillard did not so much reinvigorate the audience-as-passive-recipient theories of the Frankfurt School as much as highlighted a sort of circular reciprocal relationship in which producers continue to feed the audience's desire for spectacle, entertainment and fantasies, and the consumers ask for nothing more.

#### IV. Mass Publics, Subjects, and Subjectivities

As illustrated by the previous two sections, one of the major concerns for media culture theorists has been how media either impinge upon or inform opportunities for democratic potential and political praxis. McLuhan's (2005 [1967]) ideas about the public prior to the advent of mass media were not particularly well articulated, but it is clear that he saw potential for audiences to creatively and actively participate in the world through media. "The living room has become a voting booth," he remarked, and people now could participate in all sorts of political events, via their television sets (22). Yet while he seemed to recognize political potential, he also referred frequently to the pervasiveness of the media into every aspect of our lives; and it remains unclear how McLuhan resolved the tension between audience as active versus passive. But as Sonia Livingstone (2005) pointed out, in our contemporary mass-mediated world, audiences (historically described as passive consumers) and publics (supposedly active and politically engaged), though still frequently put in opposition to one another, are now one and the same (34). This section therefore explores the extent to which theories about the relationships between media culture and the public sphere and spectator and public subject helped scholars to resolve some of those tensions. I also review how media interactions with the 'public' have been theorized and help to construct and deconstruct individual and group identities, as well as review what role theorists argued that media play in subject formation.

Stanley Aronowitz (1993) argued that most theorists assumed that popular culture and mediated knowledge are consequences of 'mass society' and that technological transformations, in particular, entailed "massification, fragmentation, and degradation" to the point where democracy was considered impossible (76). Mass cultural theory, he asserted, also implies "the theory of the massification of society and the transformation of the conception of the *polis*" (77). As a result, many theorists and critics alleged that the public sphere, in its ideal vision of free individuals who are capable of participating in their own governance, has been lost; people were believed to be passively giving consent, rather than actively participating in political life. But within this discourse, Aronowitz argued, the lower classes are not included in these "masses;" rather, the middle class became the primary bearer of cultural degeneration. As Bruce Robbins (1993) also pointed out, a major theme throughout many early analyses of the public sphere has been that of some great historical moment of democracy that once existed, but is now lost, with

mass media taking the brunt of the blame, starting most significantly with the theories of Jürgen Habermas, who analyzed the impact of mass media on both the rise and the fall of the bourgeois public sphere.

Prior to the formation of the public sphere, Jürgen Habermas (1991 [1962]) noted, Europe was characterized by what he called a “representational culture,” in which governmental authorities would represent themselves to the public to reinforce their power and authority (such as speeches made from castle balconies or messengers speaking from podiums in village squares), and audiences passively received the information relayed. With the advent of capitalism, there emerged a public sphere, Habermas argued, in which private individuals (entitled by relations of capital) came together to critically discuss important issues, exchanged knowledge, and used reason as a check on governmental powers. The key to the public sphere was the existence of rational-critical debate. In theory, status was disregarded and participants were meant to address public policy issues common to everyone, while discourse presupposed a problematization of issues and policies apart from state interests; however, in practice, the public sphere was made up of property-owning, educated bourgeois males, who had access to cultural products (most notably, printed materials) and the wherewithal to enter into discourse and arrive at a considered and common opinion.

Early forms of media (primarily texts mass produced through the printing press) played a crucial role in the formation of this initial public sphere of educated, propertied elites and provided a forum for the communication of ideas, information, and news that allowed its members to be informed about economic and market issues and provided opportunities for discussion of relevant social issues. Habermas argued, however, that the rise of the welfare state and special interest groups, the extension of voting rights to the masses, and the growth of mass media and its passively consuming public<sup>17</sup>, all led to the degeneration of critical discourse and the eventual disintegration of the public sphere. Furthermore, with the advent of welfare-state mass democracy, he added, state and society became increasingly intertwined, and the previous attention to the scrutiny of governmental policies gave way to publicity, staged displays, and manipulations of mass culture, media and public opinion, implying a return to representational culture. Echoing the Frankfurt School theorists’ claims that mass culture deleteriously liquidates high culture and audiences’ ability to think critically, Habermas theorized the discursive public

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<sup>17</sup> As previously theorized by Adorno, Horkheimer, Debord, and Baudrillard.

as giving way to a (mediated) consuming public. The disintegration of the public sphere, according to Habermas, was not just marked by the entrance of lower class members, but rather the ways in which the consumption of mass culture increasingly pervaded the upper classes (previously bourgeois). Habermas concluded that the rise of mass culture and the nature of advanced capitalism, with its large-scale corporate and social organizations, foreclose the possibility of returning to a previous model of the bourgeois public sphere; although Habermas attempted to locate potential in the realization of a contemporary public sphere, Craig Calhoun (1992) argued that he did not convincingly do so.

Others questioned whether Habermas had a thorough enough understanding of mass media to adequately critique its impact on or relationship to the contemporary public sphere. Horkheimer and Adorno, for instance, to whom Habermas unsuccessfully submitted the original text for doctoral qualification, thought it “insufficiently critical of the illusions and dangerous tendencies of an Enlightenment conception of democratic public life” (Calhoun 1992: 4). And according to Calhoun, a central weakness of Habermas’s text was his unequal treatment of earlier and later twentieth century public spheres; his inquiry into earlier public sphere issues did not take into account alternative presses or other rational-critical debates of the time. The result, Calhoun suggested, may have been an overestimation on Habermas’s part of both the original political impact of the bourgeois public sphere and its supposed subsequent degeneration.

Habermas was also criticized for neglecting to address issues of class, race, gender and sexuality or theorize the political activities of alternate or sub-cultural groups; additionally, many claimed that his account of the public sphere rather reinforced social hierarchies. Andreas Huyssen (1986), for instance, suggested that Habermas ascribed feminine gender characteristics to mass culture and the masses, while assigning masculine features to high culture and the public sphere (privileged realms of male activity), and thus limited the political potential of the public (188-207). Nancy Fraser (1992) reiterated this criticism when she suggested that masculine gender qualities were built into the system and structure of the public sphere, and Habermas’s feminization of private space created a further division between private and public spheres (115). Fraser also argued that Habermas failed to examine alternate, competing public spheres and counter-publics. Furthermore, his rhetoric of open accessibility, rationality and a suspension of hierarchical participation, Fraser insisted, was itself “deployed as a strategy of distinction” that Habermas failed to fully recognize. Also, because Habermas’s account emphasized the

singularity of the bourgeois public sphere, there was an implication that it served as, or was a model for, *the* public sphere; thus, there existed an assumption within Habermas's text that having a *single* public sphere is desirable, while a multitude of public spheres is a departure from democracy. Fraser contended that a plurality of contesting and competing publics better promotes participatory democracy, and a proliferation of subaltern publics promotes a widening of the discursive field. Michael Warner (2002), agreeing with this premise, found political potential only within what he called, "counterpublics," which he described as publics that are aware of their subordinate status and act out against normative culture (85); however, struggling as they always are against the tide of dominant publics, he recognized that counterpublics must necessarily enter into the larger the public discourse in order to have any potential political influence (87). Though Habermas's version of inclusivity was not inclusive enough, and Warner's version of inclusivity was more theoretically than practically prescribed, both identified the value in opening up discourse to as many as possible.

Along with increased media-saturation came an intensification of theoretical analyses of the public sphere and of the role of the public 'subject' within media culture. Michael Warner (1992) argued that individuals adopt the attitude and imagination of the public as a collection of non-specific identities and embody a variety of identities in different public contexts.<sup>18</sup> According to Habermas, the public that is reading is the one that is debating about itself; but in reading and debating about itself, Warner suggested, people adopt a very particular kind of rhetoric about who they are—their personhood. In the process, one has to then deny, or make negative, a certain relationship to oneself. When we consider the nature of images and texts as public, he added, we don't point to a measurable series of others; we do not tend to perceive the public as made up of individuals, with their own private and personal lives and needs, or as offering a broad and expansive set of discourses among individuals, but rather as some ambiguous, disembodied mass, which, Warner argued, presents a problem of rhetorical analysis for the public sphere. In print media, one's audience was indefinite; the abstract audience became a mode of claiming public disposition. The spectator or reader thus becomes a "prosthetic person,"<sup>19</sup> argued Warner, neither reducing nor expressing the body (that reads or spectates). Because she is no longer self-identical (part of the ambiguous mass), she is allowed the "negativity of debate"—not just access

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<sup>18</sup> Mattelart (1998) reiterates this point when he suggests that people can only interact with one crowd at a time, but can engage, simultaneously, in several publics at the same time (14).

<sup>19</sup> Warner borrows this phrase from Lauren Berlant.

to reason or critique, but is then able to identify with a disembodied public subject that she can imagine exists parallel to her personal, private self (381).

But Warner added that this public subject, in a sense, *does* have a body because the public, prosthetic body “takes abuse for the private person” (381). Implicit within many media narratives (and some media theory, like that of McLuhan and subsequent arguments about the virtual public sphere) was a utopian sense of universality and the suggestion that people can somehow “transcend” their realities, body or status. However, as Warner (1992) argued (echoing others such as Huyssen:1986 and Fraser: 1992), while the bourgeois public sphere claimed no particular relation to *any* body or body image, the composition of the public sphere nevertheless relied heavily on specific bodies (white, male), consequently constraining other bodies (a process of making specific other bodies via the non-specificity of the public mass). The public body turns individuals, in some large degree, into disembodied parts of a mass, as individuals imagine themselves among an equally ambiguous mass of people who are similar to their own private persons; each member of this public, as her own (raced, classed, sexed, or gendered) individual with potentially very different ideas, thoughts, and responses, defined in great part *by* (the specificity of) the public sphere, nevertheless gets lost within the non-specificity of the masses. In order to become a part of that mass body—become a mass subject—one has to leave one’s body behind, “abstracted away from it,” cancelling it out as a mode of positivity, and return into the spectacle (394). Heavily mediated by “the discourse of consumption,” Warner contended, practically all of our pleasures come to us now coded by the publicity of the mass media; and, as a result, all of these sites of publicity, capable of illuminating the other bodies in a common discourse of the subjects relation to both the nation and its markets, are pieces of a larger public sphere (386). Therefore, Warner suggested, in each of these mediated contexts, “we become the mass-public subject,” and all of the social identities denied by the bourgeois public sphere become somewhat compensated for by the spectacle of mass media; it is within this recognition of ourselves as the mass public subject that we recognize our minority status, an alienation that is common to all of the mediating contexts of publicity (387). Mass publicity provides individuals a way of reconciling between embodiment and self-abstraction, he argued, which is a powerful appeal to those who have been thus far minoritized by the public sphere’s “rhetoric of normative disembodiment” (396).

The loss or recognition of the individual (whether one's body, identity, or political power) within the 'mass' of media culture was a prevalent and escalating concern among theorists. Stuart Ewen (1996), for instance, argued that the public itself does not actively participate in the shaping of political and social life because the modern public individual increasingly is defined by her spectatorship and isolation (59). Unlike the eighteenth-century public, which inhabited the physical spaces of the marketplace and in which interactions occurred through face-to-face conversations, the modern public became a collective of dispersed individuals, physically separate, but whose cohesion is nevertheless mentally perceived—an assertion that clearly anticipates ensuing discourse about the virtual public sphere (68). Dana Polan (1993), on the other hand focused more on the spaces of discourse media supposedly create, arguing that the very place in which a public space of discussion is meant to be provided (such as within many television or news shows) also structurally closes this possibility by the very form it takes, thus denying individuals access to public discourse. Media often reveal little more than spectacle; while talk shows, for example, purportedly seek a truthful exploration of a topic, they really only play towards audience desire for excitement, a good fight, and the spectacle of debate, rather than provide an actual reasoned discussion of issues.

The notion of the public, as first defined by Habermas, has been replaced, many have argued, by a consumer market, wherein consumption, rather than rational-critical debate, becomes the primary mode of access and interaction with the public sphere. Furthermore, as discussed, whereas the early public sphere seemed to rely on a rhetoric of abstract disembodiment, the contemporary, mass mediated public sphere now displays a wide array of bodies for consumption, admiration, identification, and appropriation. Whereas the bourgeois model of the public sphere seemed to be indicative of rationality and universality, counter-publics revealed quite the opposite, forming physical and discursive arenas dedicated to specific and alternate identities and practices. And while the private realm, under Habermas's model of the public sphere, theoretically relied upon a separation of private from public, acts of privacy now are increasingly performed and represented within the public arena—in great part through mass media. Habermas's version of the bourgeois public sphere theorized (a very specific group of) rational critical subjects speaking both within and about society, but this model of a public sphere, as subsequent scholars pointed out, no longer exists (if it ever did) and cannot adequately address contemporary public issues and identities.

As discussed, scholars increasingly have identified and theorized the blurring of boundaries between high and low culture, the public sphere and mass media, passive and active audiences, and the spectator versus the political public subject. And more recently, the public sphere has been described as fragmented—consisting of multiple and often conflicting identities and groups and operating within numerous and changing contexts, spaces and formations. Recent analyses of the public sphere have also suggested that our experiences as subjects often direct our public and political interactions. Therefore, in the 1970s and 1980s, most notably at the height of identity politics, many theorists began moving away from theories of the “mass” to focus on issues and concerns of individual subjectivity; this theoretical shift is perhaps best metaphorically exemplified by the popular rallying cry at the time, “the personal is political,” a phrase that is also indicative of the ways in which identity politics perceived a causal relationship between individual experiences and political activism. But to discuss the public sphere in its multiplicity of competing, overlapping, and relational publics, one must necessarily consider media not just as intersecting with or influencing the public sphere (and thus separate from), but as elements *of* the public sphere—discursive arenas for various politics, identities, subjectivities, and economies; thus, subsequent theorists also began to provide analyses of how media contributed to new models of self-representation and self-authorization. New theories of audience, public, and spectatorship were thus proposed to address the previously theorized singularity of the public sphere in its plurality.

Film theory, in particular, was grounded primarily in a critique of the ideological effects of cinema and concerned with the development of alternative practices that would free both film narratives and the spectator from such dominant social narratives and structures. Drawing on the work of Kluge and Negt, Miriam Hansen (1983), for instance, argued that American silent cinema offered a platform for the emergence of a new and conceptually proletarian public sphere, constituted at the intersection of a decaying bourgeois public sphere and the rise of modern capitalism. As Hansen pointed out, American cinema early on was discussed in terms of its public functions, and the rhetoric surrounding film spoke most specifically to working-class audiences; motion pictures were hailed as “democracy’s theater” and “the laboring man’s university” (148). The democratic appeal of film, Hansen pointed out, was that this new medium, particularly in its earliest incarnations of silent film, had the power to speak to *everyone*; and the notion of film as providing a new universal language became a key metaphor for film discourse.

Additionally, the historiography of American film reiterated the working class audience member's relationship to cinema; film purportedly offered a useful narrative for immigrant integration into democratic society, becoming a cinematic agent of acculturation. Hansen argued that the cinema's claim to realism, democracy, and universality, with its accompanying elements of interiority, intimacy and individuality; however, all these claims suggest an appropriation of the characteristics of the classical bourgeois public sphere, while also adopting similar mechanisms of exclusion and abstracted identities (151). With the rise of Hollywood cinema, and in order to garner the largest audiences, film production increasingly had to avoid the representation of differences (ethnic, racial, sexual, national, etc.); thus the diverse experiences that early film represented were increasingly "muted in social compromise" (153). As with the bourgeois public sphere, one's position within the theatre, Hansen suggested, was similarly split between private and public, active participant within or spectator of (153). In theory, both the media industry and democratic public's aim was not to exclude, but rather to integrate diverse people into a supposed melting-pot; yet more effectively, she argued, people were integrated into an homogenous consumer society, fundamentally redefining, in the process, the public sphere by organizing private experiences and consumption on a mass, public scale.

In film's mediation of the private with the public, Hansen pointed out, many theorists argued that cinema gave the illusion of social participation, offering within public space an imaginary private sphere (155). With the disintegration of the bourgeois public sphere, a new type of public sphere began to emerge within mass media, which took private instances of human experience and turned them into objects of capitalist production, meanwhile perpetuating formal mechanisms of exclusion and abstract identity and a superficial division of private from public. But rather than emphasize historical parallels (between the public sphere and cinema), or the cinema's integration into the public sphere, Hansen argued, we might be better served to consider the gap created—the possibility that despite, and perhaps even because of, its commercial orientation (and often "parasitic and illusory grasp of human needs and qualities"), cinema made publicly visible human experiences in relationship to, rather than separate from, the public sphere and highlighted the economic, cultural, and social experiences and material conditions of the spectator (156).

However, cinema's potential to radically reorganize public experience and offer resistance to social hegemony also hinges on the formal organization and theorization of spectatorship. The

perceived structural changes in public modes of address (from representational culture to the rational-critical spaces of debate, back to what again appeared to be a representational culture), spawned new analytical models that theoretically highlighted multiple modes of spectator experience and the political potential thereof. Bergstrom and Doane (1989), speaking of early theories of spectatorship, pointed out how the ‘subject’ became “an indispensable category in the theorization of signifying practices,” particularly within film (5). Subjectivity, they contended, was conceived as an effect of narrative, looking, and hearing in a way that was particular to cinema, the theorization of which also represented a major shift in the contemporary development of the public sphere.

Many early film theorists, such as Jean-Louis Baudry, Christian Metz, and Laura Mulvey, used psychoanalytic theoretical frameworks—particularly those of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan—to help explain how subjectivities were formed and experienced. This wave of psychoanalytical film theory relied most heavily on the application of Jacques Lacan’s (1977 [1949]) theory of the mirror stage, in which infants misrecognize their perceived fragmented body as a whole while looking in the mirror and assume an illusory sense of unity and a deceptive sense of mastery over their bodies, which then acts as the basis for the development of the ego. Psychoanalytical film theorists made a comparison between Lacan’s infant and the film spectator, with the screen serving as a mirror through which the spectator, through the camera, misidentifies himself, unconsciously, as a whole, unified, and coherent ego, reflecting a similar paradigm of recognition and misrecognition identified within later theories of the public sphere. These theorists, however, often have been criticized for treating individuals within audiences as passive and for not acknowledging either the possibilities for active spectatorship or the differences in how individuals respond to film narratives. And yet these psychoanalytical theories were often used to identify larger (implicitly unconscious) structures of social hegemony.

Focusing on the concept of spectatorship as a constructed ‘subject position,’ Mulvey (1999 [1975]), for example, posited that psychoanalytical theory would help explain how the visual and textual systems of film reinforce and exacerbate traditional social gender narratives by using pre-existing social interpretations of sexual difference. Mulvey argued that unchallenged, mainstream cinema codes erotic representations of women into a language of patriarchal dominant culture. Mulvey also suggested that the “hermetically sealed world” of the cinema, in

which the conventions of film (cinematography and editing) and the darkness of the theater, juxtaposed against the brilliant images on the screen “magically” work together to create a sense of separation between the spectators, heightening the voyeuristic fantasy, giving the (public) viewer the sense, too, of looking into a private world. The cinema, Mulvey contended, has a more powerful impact than other forms of looking (i.e. photography, theatre, strip-tease, or other forms of live entertainment) because of the techniques used—such as space, editing, and manipulation of cinematic narratives—all of which are conducive to developing narcissistic scopophilia, focusing attention on the human form in such a way as to mix curiosity and the desire to look with a natural human fascination with likeness and recognition, thus creating a spectacle of the female body<sup>20</sup> (836). The screen image, she insisted, helps to construct the “matrix of the imaginary,” recognition and misrecognition, and identification—thus the articulation of an “I” of subjectivity, which finds such intense expression, she argued, within film (836).

Therefore, while there exists a sense of *separation* of the “erotic identity of the subject from the object on the screen,” there also exists, simultaneously, an *identification* with the screen image through the viewer’s fascination with and recognition of his like human form (837), an important distinction that continued to inform media theory. Mulvey went on to argue that the pleasure derived from looking has resulted in a split between an active male and passive female set of positions within film narratives. The woman’s function within the film narrative, she suggested, is two-fold: woman as erotic object for the characters within the narrative and as erotic object for the spectator. Within this controlled narrative environment, the man “controls the film phantasy and also emerges as the representative of power in a further sense: as the bearer of the look of the spectator,” transferring this power to the male audience member who identifies with the male protagonist—his screen surrogate—and garners an active power of an erotic gaze (839). The female, however, in psychoanalytical terms, poses a larger problem, because she symbolizes something that the male gaze “continually circles around” but does not acknowledge—the fact that she does not have a penis, which Mulvey argued implicitly threatens the male with castration and displeasure; thus woman is always defined by her sexual difference

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<sup>20</sup> Here, Mulvey relies on Lacan’s theory of the mirror phase to help explain how viewers in cinemas are similarly affected by what they perceive to be a more perfect body than their own, with which they identify; “recognition,” she adds, “is thus overlaid with misrecognition,” and the image perceived on the screen is recognized as a reflection of the viewer’s body, but the viewer’s perception of it as somehow superior projects the screen body as an ideal ego – an alienated subject – outside of oneself, giving rise to “the future generation of identification with others” (836).

(840). The result, Mulvey argued, is that the woman threatens the pleasure that she offers. Echoing Frankfurt School critiques of media's tendency to habituate audiences to conform to dominant social narratives, the female characters in films, Mulvey demonstrated, through an almost sadistic voyeurism, are either devalued, punished, put into their place, or saved (to lessen the powerful effect they have as an object of desire); otherwise, women are fetishized into objects of physical beauty (through fetishistic scopophilia), transforming their dangerousness into icons of something satisfying—in and of themselves.

Mulvey's article was seminal for the future of media studies, as it demonstrated the way in which film constructs, interpellates, and reproduces a viewing (and obedient) subject, fortifies dominant social narratives, solicits identification with ideological positions of subjectivity, and reinforces public representations of women. However, a few points within her argument make assumptions that since have been critiqued; first is the assumption that the viewer's interpretation of the film takes place unconsciously—that the viewer is a passive recipient of meaning-making. Mulvey also implicated popular culture by suggesting that it discourages a critical distance from what viewers watch while in the theater, which echoed earlier Frankfurt School criticisms of the 'dumbing' effect of popular culture. Furthermore, Mulvey's theories of spectatorship led many feminist scholars (Joan Scott 1991; Teresa de Lauretis 1984; Gaylyn Studlar 1993; and Chandra Talpade Mohanty 1992) to theorize the significance of "experience" in subject formation. Lauretis contended that experience is complex and carries multiple meanings, which continually changes and is reformed (through double or multiple modes of identification) within varying contexts (1987: 18). Scott supported the legitimacy of experience, but argued that experience alone cannot be provided as an explanation or evidence of knowledge. While such narratives make visible one's experiences, exposing various mechanisms of repression, Scott argued that scholars still need a theoretical framework to help explain how these experiences have been constructed, or otherwise risk the tendency to naturalize or reify discursively-produced identities. Furthermore, the use of experience as evidence can also lead to the oversimplification of group histories by relying on a few key sets of experiences to represent all within a group. Thus, theorists, Scott concluded, should study the various processes of subject formation, not just experience.

While Mulvey's theory of the gaze helped to explain the construction of gendered subject positions, many theorists argued that her use of a psychoanalytical framework to understand

sexual difference was as essentialist, totalizing, and oppressive as the cinematic structures she critiqued (8). Ann Kaplan (1983), for instance, problematized the general application of Mulvey's model by arguing that the gaze could be adopted by either male or female viewer; the male is not always a controlling and active subject, nor is the female always a passive object (23). Similarly, Teresa de Laurentis (1984), who sought to theorize what she perceived to be an excluded female experience, argued that Mulvey's female spectator does not merely adopt a masculine subjectivity, but rather experiences a "double-identification," in which she alternately experiences both the passive and active subject positions (69). Christine Gledhill (1988), on the other hand, argued that the psychoanalytical film approach originates from a masculine perspective; theoretically, she contended, the feminine, from the beginning, is categorized by lack, absence and otherness. Jackie Byars (1991) reiterated this assertion when she argued that Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis views the feminine as deviant and masculine as normative; psychoanalytical film theory therefore "cannot account for resistance and ideological struggle," but rather reinforces mechanisms of dominant ideologies (137). Ironically, as Bergstrom and Doane (1989) pointed out, the origin of the female spectator arose out of an absence of the female viewer in Mulvey's analysis. In isolating sexual difference as the primary process involved within cinema, the use of psychoanalysis, Bergstrom and Doane argued, enabled critics to overlook or ignore other important categories of subjectivity, such as class, race, or sexuality (1989: 8). As many pointed out, race, ethnicity and class are implicated in structures of looking and are thus important factors to also consider when providing an analysis of spectatorship (Lutz & Collins 1994; Gaines 1988; de Laurentis 1987; Tagg 1988; Traube 1992).

Steve Neale (2002 [1983]) acknowledged the significance (to both feminist film theory and film theory in general) of Mulvey's argument, but sought to interrogate how heterosexual masculinity (implied by Mulvey's analysis) has been inscribed in cinema and how this implied inscription is problematic. His aim, he suggested, was not to challenge Mulvey's general theory of the gaze, but rather to highlight the ways in which masculinity is represented, directly or indirectly, through the male characters and images in film, but also of the male spectator. Aligning himself with John Ellis' (1982) argument that a viewer's identification with cinematic characters is not so clearly gender-based or gender-aligned (males identifying with males; females with females), but is rather a much more complicated, multiple, and fractured process,

Neale argued that cinema draws on many different forms of desire, many of which are “mobile, fluid, constantly transgressing identities, positions and roles,” becoming, at times, even contradictory (278). Neale pointed out that a voyeuristic and fetishizing gaze is directed at men, too, but within a “heterosexual and patriarchal society” the body of the male character in films is rarely marked explicitly as the erotic object of another male gaze; such a male gaze necessarily must be purposefully motivated and any erotic element repressed (281). Neale articulated two primary ways in which viewers identify with an image on the cinematic screen: narcissistic identification and identification through contemplation. In narcissistic identification, the viewer sees and identifies with what he perceives to be a powerful and omnipotent screen image of himself (the *idea ego*)—an identification that is typically (though not always) of the same gender. In identification through contemplation, Neale suggested, the hero on the screen (typically male) becomes an object of the viewer’s gaze through contemplation. Neale argued that an active voyeuristic look exists in male-genre films (particularly action, combat, and western films) and that the battles and struggles that typically take place on-screen make the male characters subject to voyeuristic looking, becoming sexualized objects of other men. If these looks become fixed, as often happens within fight and battle scenes—where the male characters exchange aggressive looks, the male characters become fetishized, fixed not on the body of the male, but rather on the actual fight scenes, thus detracting from any potential erotic male-to-male desire and pleasure in looking. Neale therefore suggested that it is unsurprising that typically male-genre films (i.e. westerns) involve sado-masochistic themes; furthermore, he argued, identification through contemplation may also explain why violent scenes within male-genre films often present a mutilation of the male body, suppressing or eliminating any homoeroticism that may arise through a disqualification or mutilation, so to speak, of the male body as an object of erotic contemplation.

As explored within this section, media increasingly inferred the existence of a public discursive process through which individual and collective experiences were not merely represented, but rather explored, negotiated, contested and (re)articulated. Thus, the theorization of subjectivity and spectatorship carried on and extended the original work of the Frankfurt School by critically examining the role of mass culture and media in the formation of public subjects and subjectivities, while simultaneously elaborating upon the Birmingham School’s project of identifying and theorizing the liberatory potential of audience agency.

## V. New Media Theories

Building upon the previous theoretical frameworks thus far discussed, new media<sup>21</sup> theories further blur the boundaries between high and low culture, material and virtual relations, subject and object positions, and audience agency and passivity. While many modernist frameworks placed traditional media within an industrial machine of commerce that destroys ‘real’ culture, and in which audiences are subject to standardized, dominate and meaningless content (as per many of the Frankfurt theorists), this era of new media theory, elaborating upon Birmingham critiques, highlights analyses of popular media culture, the superficial and formulaic, the image for its own sake, pastiche, self-reflexivity, parody, the recycling of ‘high’ culture, hybridities and “mash ups,”<sup>22</sup> as well as the breakdown of artistic and cultural boundaries and theoretical binaries—from that of fact and fiction or real and virtual to machine and human. Within the field of new media, autonomy, subjectivity, and a pre-social, historical subject are often theorized as no longer figuring as the source of rationality, truth or identity. New media theory, furthermore, seems to be characterized by a poststructuralist suspicion of any stable or fixed concepts of the “real.” Given the previous discussions (within the last section) on subjectivity, subject formation, spectatorship, and earlier reviews of the theory of simulacrum, any thorough discussion of new media must also necessarily take into account subsequent theories about virtual reality and virtuality.

Also distinguished for its continued theoretical pursuit of the political potential of media, this era of new media also contains the most powerful of social ideological narratives of progress thus far articulated, as well as many (particularly early) optimistic theories of global unity and connection. The promise of a new public sphere, as many have argued, depends on access to full participation; and many saw the greatest potential for full participation through the technologies

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21 It is important to note that the term “new media” has yet to be firmly defined and is often conflated with other terms, such as “multimedia” or “digital media.” New media often has been characterized as forms that merge traditional content with newer interactive digital technologies (such as computers, smartphones, interactive gaming devices, and television)—moving beyond media that simply broadcast content (through print, older television, traditional film, etc.) to forms of media that allow audience members to view, interact with, and produce content. Contemporary media culture also is said to privilege the visual and has become a high-tech and increasingly mobile culture. Thus, the term ‘new media’ connotes a broad inclusivity, of technologies and phenomena, and often encompasses everything from multimedia, social media, interactive gaming, and digital TV to the internet, virtual reality, and machinima, as well as various forms of engagement.

22 “Mash ups” are blends and mixes of various published media content, from images and songs to video and film, for instance, that produces an altogether unique piece—usually created by consumers and re-published in social media spaces such as Facebook, MySpace, or YouTube.

of new media. As Martin Lister (2003) pointed out, our idea of ‘new’ media is not simply a reference to the most recent media technologies and processes, but also arises “from a modernist belief in social progress as delivered by technology” (2003: 11). With the advent of the “new” technologies of media came a revitalization of modernist dreams of democracy, a thriving and critically engaged public sphere, and progressive advancements in society, such as Benjamin envisaged for film. Indeed, Benjamin’s hope for film as offering new cognitive potential, pushing the boundaries of social and natural laws, allowing for a new re-visioning of material structures and relations, and providing a space in which people can act out, test, and probe their real physical realities with cinematic representations of a ideal world is perhaps best exemplified within the sphere of new media. And yet, as I shall also point out, along with many utopian theories of new media came some of the most dystopian of critiques.

Some of the more utopian theorists claimed new media brought about the formation of global communities, decentralization of the public sphere, and fundamentally changed, for the better, the nature of democracy. Joseph Pelton (1989), for instance, argued that the internet, which he referred to as a “global brain,” would turn the concept of a global village into a reality and spawn a new “global consciousness,” resulting, inevitably, in a new breed of human that he called “*Homo electronicus*.”<sup>23</sup> Nicholas Negroponte (1990) predicted a “radically new culture” emerging as a result of digital technologies, in which electronic communities will supersede the values of nation-states and our socialization in “digital neighborhoods” will make physical space irrelevant (7). He also argued that digital technologies are globalizing, decentralizing, and democratically empowering. Howard Rheingold (1991; 1994; 2000), who coined the term “virtual community,” argued that this era of new media, often referred to as the “DIY”<sup>24</sup> era of citizenship and journalism, enables a broader constituency of people to publish and voice their opinions (14). Rheingold argued that because online communities provide forums that are decentralized, self-governing, and more accessible to a wider audience, they have the power to radically reimagine the public sphere. Henry Jenkins (2006a), suggested that this era of new media represents a positive shift in how the public relates to media, a shift that is characterized by the relationship between three concepts—media convergence<sup>25</sup>, participatory culture, and

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<sup>23</sup> Pelton did not elaborate on this term.

<sup>24</sup> Do It Yourself.

<sup>25</sup> Jenkins (2006a) defined convergence as the “flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences,” which he suggested are always

collective intelligence<sup>26</sup> (2006a: 2). Jenkins argued that because consumers and producers' roles are more fluid and media technologies more accessible than before, people have greater opportunities to participate in media culture and the (co)production of content. The combination of these three elements of convergence, participatory culture, and collective intelligence, he argued, provides people with "an alternative source of media power" (4). What both Rheingold and Jenkins failed to analyze, however, are the ways in which people also contribute to the capitalist system through their collective unpaid labor. While Rheingold and Jenkins have been criticized for neglecting to address the real material conditions of the "virtual community" or "participatory culture," their visions of collective and cooperative media production nevertheless represent a large body of theorists who frame the democratic potential of media in a similarly hopeful way.

Other theorists were optimistic about the democratic potential of new media, but insisted that we also identify and consider the real material, social, and cultural impediments to full participation. Felicia Sullivan (2003), author of "Community Technology and Public Discourse," for instance, highlighted the positive changes in modes of public discourse as a result of recent technologies, but insisted that access to the digital tools of production, as well as knowledge of how to use, them is paramount to the distribution of ideas. The potential for democratic engagement in public dialogue that takes place primarily on the Internet, she argued, is significantly affected by access (or lack thereof) to computer-based technologies. Lawrence Lessig (1998) argued that the digital sphere does not guarantee a democratic process; various forms of corporate and governmental regulation and control are always embedded within the digital sphere, and we must make visible such constraints in order to better understand and interrogate the anti-democratic potential of new media technologies. Furthermore, he argued, citizens must become technologically literate and enter the debates about the political impact of new media. Additionally, Hans Magnus Enzensberger (2000) argued that while grassroots and independent media held the greatest potential for a democratic public sphere, these models could not compete with larger commercial systems or successfully distribute content to a wide enough

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in search of new entertainment experiences; the successful circulation of media content across different systems, he added, depends heavily on consumers' (inter)active participation (2-3).

<sup>26</sup> Jenkins (2006a) theorization of this era as one of "collective intelligence"<sup>26</sup> describes how consumers interact with each other and discuss the bits and pieces each extracts from the media flow, which in turn informs the media industry of important trends and interests; "consumption," Jenkins argued, depends upon the process of collective intelligence—the pooling together knowledge, resources, and skills (4).

audience; he argued that public policies governing media broadcasting tend to marginalize local access to content and give priority to commercial broadcasters.

The increasing development, sophistication and mobility of multimedia devices and technologies sparked yet another wave of theories about how the daily saturation of media negatively impacted subjectivity and agency. Susan Buck-Morss (1992), for example, argued that the human sensory system experiences a “dialectical reversal,” wherein aesthetic experiences change from being “in touch” with reality to a mode of “blocking out reality” (18). Sensory perception (aesthetics), she insisted, becomes so overwhelmed (in the contemporary mass mediated culture, but particularly through modern technologies) as to become an *anaesthetic*, numbing our senses and our cognitive capacity to respond politically. Buck-Morss described the way in which the nervous system (and thus our abilities of sense-perception) is extended beyond our physical body to include the various stimuli we receive from our external environment; our brain is thus only one “part of a [larger] system that passes through the person and her or his (culturally specific, historically transient) environment” (12). The problem, Buck-Morss added, is that under the conditions of “modern shock” that are brought about by an increasingly saturated media environment, our response to stimuli *without* thinking has become a matter of necessity (16). While we can still *see*, Buck-Morss suggested, we have lost our ability to *look*—“bombarded with fragmentary impressions [our eyes] see too much—and register nothing” (18). Buck-Morss’ theory of anaesthetization, which she likened to a sort of drug-like altering of consciousness, affects people collectively rather than individually, because everyone sees and experiences the same “altered world” (23). And her theorization of this “techno-body of society,” in which she asserted that we are “imagined to be as insensate to pain as the individual body under general anaesthetics, so that any number of operations could be performed upon the social body,” also strongly suggests a vulnerability to hegemony (30).

While Caroline Bassett (2005) and Jonathan Crary (2001) similarly explored how new media technologies can alter sensory experiences, they also theorized new modes of subjectivity. Caroline Bassett (2005) suggested that new media technologies enable a sort of “collective construction,” a space, she described, as “produced through a collective imagination” (2005: sect 8, para 1). Bassett argued that while the outside city spaces may engage one’s vision, mobile technology caused frequent distractions indicative of the way in which people often shift attention from physical to virtual spaces. In the process, Bassett argued, one registers little

visually within her physical space, while her “intellectual attention” shifts away from the physical space of her environment into the virtual one of her mobile phone. This shifting of attention, however, involves both a selection of and an investment in whatever space one *chooses* to attend to in any particular moment, but then this shift is also necessarily at the expense of other objects and spaces. To pay attention, she added, is to prioritize, to “invest and disinvest” (para 12). Jonathan Crary (2001) similarly pointed out that attentiveness within the modern world is “continuous with states of distraction, reverie, dissociation, and trance,” but connects visibility and vision to the changing modes of human subjectivity and identity (46). Mass culture, he argued, transformed the “human sensorium” into private and subjective spaces for consumption of visual texts. This shift in visual culture, as largely the result of new media technologies and the images produced by millions of bits of data, Crary argued, also is supplanting the work of the human eye, changing the ways in which we perceive, and displacing embodied visibility with abstract computer codes. This change in visibility, Crary added, has the effect of also changing people’s sense of the world around them, their embodied place within it, and thus their subjective experiences.

One of the more dystopian of new media theorists was Paul Virilio. In his analysis of the rise and speed of new media technologies, Virilio (1991 [1984]) echoed Crary’s argument that technologies manipulated the viewer’s visual perception, but added that these technologies caused a sense of physical disembodiment from one’s space—or a sort of deterritorialization of subjective experience. And sharply contrasting McLuhan’s vision of media as restoring unity of perception, Virilio contended that technology *replaces* our human sensorium and that our communicative experiences are increasingly discontinuous, fragmented, and transhistorical. The result of these altered perceptions, Virilio suggested, echoing Baudrillard’s concept of the simulacrum, is that the televised or real-time image supersedes what it represents.<sup>27</sup> And in contradiction to Benjamin’s vision for technological progress, for Virilio, the human subject and cognitive processes are altogether displaced by technology’s new modes of perception and representation. Furthermore, whereas Benjamin (1969) sought to “refunction” technologies and refashion them as tools of social change, Virilio rather charged that technologies reduced people to becoming merely functions *of* technology; he eschewed any sort of technopolitics and did not

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<sup>27</sup> In an interview for *CTheory*, Virilio remarks: “television is a media of crisis, which means that television is a media of accidents. Television can only destroy. In this respect, and even though he was a friend of mine, I believe that McLuhan was completely wrong in his idyllic view of television” (para 10).

offer suggestions for how these technologies can serve positive social needs. Douglas Kellner (2011b) criticized Virilio's work for being excessively negative, one-sided and "technophobic," and suggested that Virilio neglected to acknowledge any emancipatory or democratic potential in new media technologies (para 2-3).

In an effort to address what he perceived to be two dichotomously theorized spaces that are often placed in seemingly unresolvable tension with each other, as indicated by the wide range of arguments previously discussed, Edward Soja (2007) argued that our approach to spatial thinking, as a result of new media technology, has been bipartite—between what he called "Firstspace" and "Secondspace," which represent an epistemological dualism of objectivist-materialist theoretical approaches versus subjectivist-idealist approaches (62).<sup>28</sup> Firstspace perspective, according to Soja, is focused on the 'real' material world, or the actual physical geography of the spaces we inhabit, and represents material forms that can be empirically analyzed, explained, and mapped, while Secondspace perspective refers to "imagined representations of spatiality" and represents our ideas about space—how we locate, for example, ourselves and others subjectively within the virtual space of new media technologies, whether that of a 3-D film, a social networking application, a massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG), or a GPS navigator (6-10). Soja's formulation of Thirdspace draws both on the traditionally dualistic material and mental spaces we inhabit and experience (11). Thus, Thirdspace, according to Soja, is simultaneously imagined and real; the confluence of these two spaces—or what Soja called the "inherent spatiality of human life"—is what we each experience on a daily basis, but is not inherently either utopian or dystopian (1). As Andrea Wollensak (2001) pointed out, responding to Soja's theory of Thirdspace, in this era of "digital self-awareness," our experiences of space are much more complex and not easily theorized. As opposed to Buck-Morss's theory of "dialectical reversal,"<sup>29</sup> Wollensak argued that not only do we have access to more information—such as up-to-the-minute weather reports, GPS devices and virtual maps that pinpoint our location, and online video conferencing that allows us to see and speak with someone far away—we also have a heightened ability to experience ourselves

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<sup>28</sup> Soja's argument that scholars tend to focus almost entirely on either Firstspace or Secondspace perspectives echoes Massumi's suggestion that cultural theorists tend to theorize within the dichotomies of "naïve realism" or "naïve subjectivism." Each attempts to locate a middle ground between these binary perspectives, a way of theoretically combing what Soja calls the 'real' and 'imagined' (Soja).

<sup>29</sup> Wherein aesthetic experiences change from being "in touch" with reality to a mode of "blocking out reality," overwhelmed and anaesthetized as Buck-Morss argued we are by external stimuli (1992: 18).

shifting within a virtual geography, “a matrix of mutability” that is often elusive, dynamic, contextual and unpredictable (122).

As theorists increasingly interrogated the intersections between digital technologies, different modes of visibility, and perceptions and experiences of space, issues around virtuality or the virtual-ness of new media spaces, as touched upon in the discussion of Soja and Wollensak, became increasingly central to new media discourse. While various terms and ways of describing this elusive and ephemeral space exist, the phrase “virtual reality,”<sup>30</sup> or VR, for short, seems to have garnered the most cultural currency. Grigore Burdea and Philippe Coiffet (2003) pointed out that many publications, TV shows, and other media have described virtual reality in various and often inconsistent ways, leading to a lot of confusion, even within “the technical literature” (1). Raymond Gozzi, Jr. (1995) argued for the use of the term “virtual reality” as a metaphor, suggesting that the news media, in particular, collectively constitute a “gigantic virtual reality generator,” with its sensationalized abstractions, distortions, and constructed realities that affect how we feel or act (1995: 456). And Steve Dixon (1999) contended that virtual reality is nothing more than a new communications medium. Others, such as Michael Heim, described virtual reality as an almost transcendental and philosophical experience, provoking experiences similar to Kant’s concept of the sublime and the realization of just how “small our finite perceptions are in the face of the infinity of possible, virtual worlds we may settle into and inhabit” (1991: 33).

More recently, professionals in the science and technology field have preferred to use the phrase “human interface technology”<sup>31</sup> rather than “virtual reality,” primarily in an attempt to distinguish the science of virtual reality technologies from precisely the types of descriptions associated with new media or the rhetoric of virtual reality as some kind of media-generated

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<sup>30</sup> Morton Heilig, an American cinematographer, theorist, and inventor, working in the 1950s with the earliest of visual media technology, was the original pioneer in virtual reality research. In 1957, Heilig invented the “Sensorama Machine,” one of the first examples of an immersive, multisensory device, for which he received a patent in 1962. A copy of the original patent and the diagrams for the Sensorama Simulator can be found at: <http://www.mortonheilig.com/SensoramaPatent.pdf>. Heilig’s initial work on head-mounted television displays, in which he designed a simulation mask with 3D slides and wide peripheral optic, stereophonic sound, and olfactory effects, was then continued by Ivan Sutherland (Burdea and Coiffet 2003: 3-4). Sutherland’s elaboration on Heilig’s head-mounted display led him to the creation of a scene generator that used “computer-generated scenes instead of analog images taken by cameras,” which became the precursor of the modern graphics accelerator, a key part of VR hardware (Burdea and Coiffet 2003: 4).

<sup>31</sup> A few examples include the Human Interface Technology Laboratory in New Zealand (<http://www.hitlabnz.org>), the Human Interface Technology Laboratory in Washington, D.C. (<http://www.hitl.washington.edu>), and the Human Interface Technology Research Group at the Applied Computing Research Centre at the University of Birmingham (<http://www.iecs.bham.ac.uk/hit/index.htm>).

fantastic alternate or augmented reality<sup>32</sup>. Thus, while no absolute definition has been reached as to what, exactly, the term “virtual reality” means, most agree that the concept of virtual reality generally entails any human/computer-generated software interface that provides any level of sensory-based, immersive or interactive, alternate reality experience or sense of being in some other environment (Arts and Humanities Data Service 2002; Balsamo 1988; Beier 2004; Briggs 1996; Negroponte 1995; Sherman and Craig 1992). One of the key defining features of virtual reality, according to Burdea and Coiffet (2003), is that the “synthetic world” is not static, but rather responds to a user’s input—whether through gesture, verbal command, or a click of a mouse—and offers “real time *interactivity*,” key features of most new media (2).

As I suggested earlier, theories do not merely describe or explain media culture, but are also always incorporated *into* media culture; the social and cultural imaginary of and about the virtual-ness of new media oftentimes informs and shapes contemporary theoretical frameworks. As Patrice Flichy (2004) argued, the “*imaginaire*” is central to the design and use of new media technologies; the utopian visions that tend to surface with the burgeoning of new technologies, he elaborated, come from both cultural and scientific discourses. Whether technical or literary, prophetic or pragmatic, these visions, Flichy argued, are often integral to the actual development of various technologies (1-2). And as Lambert Gardiner (1993) suggested, although rather optimistically, virtual reality seems to hold an even greater sway on the cultural imagination when the (hyper)media becomes the medium:

Whereas traditional media invite you into an alternative reality, hypermedia invites you into a virtual reality. [. . .] Traditional media may engross you, but hypermedia engorges you. Virtual reality is such a good simulation of natural reality that you can behave and experience within this artificial environment much as you would behave and experience in the natural environment which it represents (para 4).

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<sup>32</sup> Fictional literature has played a huge role in our cultural imaginations of virtual reality. According to Erik Davis (1998), French playwright Antonin Artaud was the first to describe what we now refer to as virtual reality in his 1938 book entitled, *The Theatre and Its Double*; Davis reports that Artaud described the theatre as “la réalité virtuelle,” or a virtual reality “in which characters, objects, and images take on the phantasmagoric force of alchemy’s visionary internal dramas” (Artaud quoted by Davis, 6). Additionally, there exists a large body of early literary pieces that speak to pre-technological visions of alternate or altered realities that resonate with our contemporary ideas of virtual reality and describe characteristics of new media. Examples include: Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932), in which the inhabitants of his Utopian world flock to the “feelies, a hybrid of cinema and Sensorama” (Douglas 1998: 18) and William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* (1984), in which the protagonist, Case, experiences a simulated version of Molly’s experiences and ‘simstims’ allow users to immerse themselves in fictional roles and computer-mediated dramas.

Certainly, imagined narratives of virtual reality seemed to engage the popular imagination and, as some have suggested (Andrejevic 2004; Balsamo 2000; Manovich 2001), also served to naturalize the role of new media technology in our lives through the semiotic and ideological mechanisms of mass media culture.<sup>33</sup>

Many scholars, such as Steven Best and Douglas Kellner (1999), Anne Balsamo (1996), Michael Benedikt (2000), Steve Dixon (1999), Arturo Escobar (2000), Diana Gromala (1996), and Kevin Robins (2000) raised concerns about what they perceived to be too much virtual reality hype proliferating in social, academic, and economic discourses, and argued for more critiques of the real material relations of media and its virtual economies. Escobar (2000), for example, argued that theoretical claims that new media technologies will make the body obsolete, destroy subjectivity, lead us into deceiving new worlds and illusory universes, or repair the economic and political failures of humanity, are merely wishful thinking, motivated by the seduction of virtual reality and other similar technologies or representing misguided efforts at constructing a utopian social reality (61). Robins (2000) contended that virtual reality propagandists, hailing a new media revolution, tended to speak as if there really did exist a new and alternative reality; he remarked that they would have us believe that we could leave behind the reality of our everyday material world and somehow migrate into this better domain (78). Best and Kellner (1999) argued that the media, particularly emerging interactive forms of media that use virtual reality technologies, are even more saturated with the sort of spectacles originally described by Debord and the Situationists, offering new forms of domination that need to be further critiqued. These spectacles (and the social relations constituted) are no longer just mediated by images, they argued, but elaborate virtual, interactive “megaspectacles,” from super-spectacular shopping malls<sup>34</sup> and high-tech virtual or 3-D entertainment centers to major amusement parks and themed towns<sup>35</sup>. The growing popularity of virtual communities, as Rheingold suggested, suggest the various ways in which humans would, if they could, imaginatively (re)construct their worlds; in a virtual world, everything from architecture to sex

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33 Whether through blockbuster films such as *The Terminator* series, *The Matrix* series, and *Star Trek*; Japanese anime; gaming platforms; popular virtual reality environments (such as *Second Life*); or within advertisements, such as the Svedka Vodka fembot or the Heineken cyborg-chic, new media culture is being inundated with narratives of virtual escape into an altered or alternate reality.

34 Such as the “Water Tower Place” in downtown Chicago, IL.

35 Perhaps the best known example is the town of Celebration, Florida, designed and maintained by The Walt Disney Co. See: <http://www.sjsu.edu/faculty/wooda/usacelebration.html>.

and gender, forms of governance, the arts and culture, and economic communities are re-imagined (1994). Robins (2000), however, insisted that while ontological, sociological or cultural issues around VR are certainly of interest, all the propaganda about virtual reality is obscuring the real material relations of production—a highly regulated and “programmed” market in which industrial laborers have been replaced with automated digital technologies and processes<sup>36</sup> (2000: 79).

Two of the more critical (and pessimistic) of theorists who discussed political economic issues of virtuality are Arthur Kroker and Michael A. Weinstein. Kroker and Weinstein (1994a) argued that the “will to virtuality gets an economic boost from a depressed economy,” because virtual thrills are simply cheaper than real ones (1). They also suggested that as our material realities depreciate, our cultural imaginations proliferate and our imaginations aggrandize virtual spaces (1994). Additionally, our “will to virtuality” is indicative of our deep skepticism of the real world; we all too quickly escape into these interactive virtual spaces because of an increasing dissatisfaction and disillusion with the real world (1994). In Kroker and Weinstein’s (1994b) *Data Trash: The Theory of Virtual Class*, they elaborated upon the impact that new media technology is having on our culture and economy and offered a theory of an emerging “virtual class,” in which people are so obsessed with emergent new media technologies, “to the point of hysteria,” that rather than becoming a “wired culture,” we are becoming a “culture wired shut” (1994b:1). We are so blindly fanatical about technology’s promise of salvation from the horrors of everyday reality, they argued, that we fail to engage in the political discourses necessary to actually have any effect in the real world (1994b: 1). Nihilism, Kroker and Weinstein insisted, is a central element of this virtual class, which practices a combination of “predatory capitalism” and “gun-ho technocratic rationalizations,” while ignoring real social concerns, instituting anew the “authoritarian mind” (1994b: 2). Pan-capitalist and neo-liberal discourses of virtual technology, they added, rely on the assumption that advanced technology has decentralized human labor’s significance within the market (Kroker and Weinstein 1994b); others, such as Jeremy Rifkin (1995) and Kevin Kelly (1998) would argue that, in fact, technology is now the *only* factor of production.

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<sup>36</sup> The emerging trend of virtual actors, or ‘avatars,’ is already being evidenced within television and website advertising and is expanding to include “interactive virtual actors” that merge virtual reality and artificial intelligence with television and the internet (Chakaveh 2008).

Many of these theorists theorized the ways in which utopian narratives of community and virtual public sphere democracy also tend to obscure power relations and corporate conglomerates' increasing control of knowledge, information and access. Arturo Escobar (2000) argued that virtual reality technologies, in particular, have become crucial to the media industry and, as a result, have garnered strong cultural and economic capital, which would not be as strong if it were not for the various cultural myths at work.<sup>37</sup> It is precisely the illusion of immediate, transparent, and consensual communication, as exemplified by some of the earlier theories discussed, that sustains the communitarian myth<sup>38</sup>, Robins argued, to the point where virtual reality is “now imagined at the scale of a global electronic *Gemeinschaft*” (2000: 90). Robins also identified a connection between spaces such as Disneyland and those of electronic virtual-like spaces, suggesting that while each reflects a desire to enter into some sort of utopian realm, we are nevertheless driven by a compulsion to “neutralize” or make bland and unthreatening such spaces, echoing Adorno and Horkheimer’s argument about the standardization of culture (2000: 91). In order to understand the real implications of virtual media culture, Robins suggested, we must therefore first de-mythologize it. Robins (2000) also asserted that our sense of exhilaration at inhabiting virtual spaces and having virtual experiences derives from the feeling of transcendence and liberation it seems to provide from the material world, but is illusory; and yet, the virtual ideologies at play (in both the social and sometimes academic world) perpetuate the persistent notion of a “communications utopia” (Robins 2000: 90).

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<sup>37</sup> For an elaboration on the role of myth in digital technologies see: Mosco, Vincent. (2004) *The Digital Sublime: Myth, Power, and Cyberspace*. Cambridge and London: MIT Press.

<sup>38</sup> The idea that community ties (whether assigned or prescribed) must first be in place before political action is possible.

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