Spectacles or Publics? Billboards, magazine covers, and 'selfies' as spaces of appearance

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This is a working paper, which is in a "first-draft" state. Critical commentary and constructive feedback are warmly invited. However, precisely because this paper will certainly evolve and develop on the basis of that feedback, the author asks that readers kindly do not cite or distribute it at all.

Abstract

This paper critically examines the relationship between theories of the public sphere and empirical research into consumption and consumer media. The notion of the public sphere, although considered with much ambivalence, quickly became 'canonical' in media and cultural studies, especially in public opinion, public service broadcasting and audience research. Questions of how the public is constituted are central to all forms of critical enquiry in the field of media studies; this paper argues that it is particularly necessary to ask what the theory of the public sphere can do for critical research into commercial and consumer media forms and mediated practices organised around commodity exchange and aspirational lifestyles, which have typically been theorised by critical theorists as manipulative spectacles that compromise and minimize the democratic potential of communications technologies. As an empirical reference points, the paper discusses three genres of consumer media: the billboard, the magazine cover and the 'selfie', drawing on established bodies of literature about outdoor advertising, magazines, and self-portraiture and snapshots. The paper sketches out the key characteristics of each genre and discusses how each has been conceptualized as either public or spectacle. Next, the paper engages the canon of work on public sphere theory, and asks how the participatory paradigm can assist in developing critical thinking about consumer media forms. The paper argues that consumer media forms are neither simply "publics" nor "spectacles", but complex "spaces of appearance" that are at once symbols of potential participation and signs of how that participation will be conditioned by capital.

Introduction

How are consumer media public? How might their particular form of publicness play into grand structures of power? And what are the implications of this for critical research into consumer and media cultures?

The study of consumer media forms is a crucial avenue of enquiry in contemporary media studies. Contrary to work that implies that only media forms explicitly linked to the potential for civic participation are public, those that are embedded in structures of capital and practices of consumption are too public in that they produce and regulate possibilities for visibility and appearance. Building on the pessimistic critique of Guy Debord (1967, 1987), a dominant strand of scholarship examining media commodities has treated them as spectacles that compromise and minimize the democratic potential of communications technologies. While not outright rejecting this argument, this paper argues that consumer media forms are neither simply "publics" nor "spectacles", but complex "spaces of appearance" that are at once symbols of potential participation and signs of how that participation will be conditioned by capital.

This paper develops this argument by selecting three empirical reference points for a discussion about how to theorize the public nature of consumer media: the billboard, the magazine cover and the selfie. Undeniably linked to the cultural industries and economies of visibility and exchange, the three media genres are difficult to categorize as public spheres in the Habermas' (1992) sense because of their strong links to the power of capital. On the other hand, it is equally difficult to write them off as mere manipulative spectacles, because of the increasingly participatory nature of all forms of consumer media. Eschewing these polar positions, this paper argues that consumer media can be theorized as public in that they are politicized "spaces of appearance". This arguably provide a more nuanced understanding of how consumer media are public, without a naive over-reliance on claims to fully liberated forms of agency.

An analytical portfolio: Three examples of consumer media forms

Consumer media forms can be broadly defined as those communication texts and communicative technologies produced by capital with the ultimate intention of producing profit for private interests. Elsewhere, I have argued that consumer media texts are intricately tied to capitalism, not only in that they are produced by profit-making industries, but in that they mediate the key messages of neo-liberal culture in relation to the self, the other, and the object (see Iqani, 2012). I have selected three indicative genres of consumer media, in order explore theoretical questions about the constitution of the public therein. I do not wish to suggest that the three media genres discussed are the only forms of consumer media that exist, nor that their particular form of publicity is easily transposed to other genres of media, which undoubtedly have their own unique characteristics. The examples are intended to operate as a kind of 'portfolio' of useful empirical references points for thinking through how to put the notion of the public to work in critical media research. As a starting point, the key characteristics of each genre are briefly outlined.

The billboard: Commercial messages in public space[1]

Billboards are large outdoor advertisements that are placed into public space, seeking to leverage the possibility of being seen by the mass market, the "universal" consumer. Outdoor advertising has its roots in European cities, in which the presence of commercial messaging, including the illumination of night time space was commonplace since the earliest moments of modernization and industrialization (Cronin, 2006). The billboard offers an opportunity to reach a truly "mass" market. An advertising executive quoted in Rosewarne (2005, 69) claims, "You can immediately penetrate an entire market with it. There's no way to avoid it if you do a large enough showing." Billboards are public in the way that no other advertisement can be public. Broadcast adverts can be switched off

[1] This section relies on parts of a work-in-progress paper that I am currently co-authoring with Gilles Baro, which critically analyses the rise of what we call "architectural adverts" in the Johannesburg CBD.

or over, and can literally be tuned out of. Advertisements in print media are also easily avoided by consumers who are not interested or are irritated by their presence, all that is required is the turning of the page. Similarly, although internet-based advertising can be very invasive of private space and communications, users have the agency at least to click away from ads they don't want to see, to unsubscribe, to close pop-up windows and to adjust the spam filter settings on their email. Consumers have none of these luxuries when it comes to billboards. Short of shutting their eyes every time they walk or drive past an annoying or offensive advert, there is no simple way to avoid the intervention of the large-scale advertisement into public space. As such, the ubiquity and unavoidability of the outdoor ad makes it a powerful tool for media planners, who ultimately aim to reach as many viewers as possible for each ad campaign. An advertising practitioner quoted in Cronin (2006, 621) explains that outdoor ads "make a brand look big", in the sense in which it becomes very visible in the public domain at a fraction of the cost it might incur to make that same brand look big in the media sphere.

Outdoor advertising also called "out of home" advertising (Cronin 2008, 4) – which speaks to its extremely public nature – it is even more visible than the kinds of ads that reach people in private spaces of consumption, such as the television in the family room or the magazine read in the bath. Because of increased 'automobility' in many cities, the outdoor advertising industry sees more traffic and congestion as an opportunity to capture more attention from potential consumers to claim to their clients that they are capable of reaching a mass audience (Cronin 2006, 621). The placement of outdoor ads in cities thus also traces certain routes of mobility through cities as well as the rhythms of everyday life therein.

Outdoor advertisements are texts that serve capital in the most obvious of senses. They intervene into public space in order to promote commodities and private interests, often deploying problematic identity categories and making unrealistic promises about the transformative potential of those commodities.

The magazine cover: Mediating consumer values[2]

The magazine cover is a metatext that seeks "to persuade people that the media text they are thinking of consuming will be worth the investment of time, energy, and money they must make in order to experience it" (Peterson, 2005: 135). Every element of magazine covers, from the image selected, its framing, the phrasing, punctuation and typography of call-out lines, the use of colour and layout elements such as stars, circles and other motifs, are geared towards convincing the reader that the magazine content is exciting, interesting and desirable. This is especially the case for magazines sold on the newsstand, which feature slightly different covers to the same editions delivered to subscribers. The latter are much simpler and feature fewer call-out lines and attention-grabbing devices (Foges, 1999: 24) as the task of convincing a reader to buy the title has already been achieved through subscription. Magazine design experts acknowledge the importance of the magazine cover, which sells both the brand and the content of the magazine and must do so "more or less instantaneously, in an environment where the newsagent's customers may be milling around and where there are shelves bearing hundreds of titles including all the competing rivals in a given field" (Holmes, 2000: 162).

Magazine covers are closely connected to the commercial nature of the media genre and signal commodity status (McCracken, 1993: 14). Covers "present an image that the magazine wishes to promote about itself – an identity that will cause it to be recognized, differentiated from its competitors, purchased, read, or at least leafed through" precisely so as to lead readers into the "consumerist ideology that permeates the magazine as a whole" (McCracken, 1993: 15). As such, the cover is the most crucial part of the entire magazine: it must entice large groups of readers; it must sell itself to audiences in order to sell its audiences on to advertisers (McCracken, 1993: 18). Publishers are known to sometimes decide on their cover image first, and then decide which features to

[2] This section reintroduces the summary of magazines covers made in my 2012 book, *Consumer Culture and the Media: Magazines in the Public Eye*, in order to lay a foundation for developing new arguments about the theoretical complexities related to the public nature of consumer media forms.

commission to match it (Holmes, 2000: 163). Industry commentators agree that a magazine loses a significant part of its identity without its cover. Magazine distributors, when returning unsold copies of titles to publishers, will often return only the cover to save shipping costs, and destroy the rest of the magazine in the warehouse (Renard, 2006). Yet a cover on its own can speak volumes about the magazine, even if it is has been detached.

As I have explored at length in the book from which the previous two paragraphs were borrowed, magazine covers are the archetypal form of consumer media. In multimodal ways (including their use of imagery, language and even the texture of the paper on which they are printed), magazines embody and promote all of the values of consumer culture (individualism, commoditised sexiness, and an obsession with material culture).

The selfie: Commoditising self-identity

The snapshot – a genre of visual communication most recently theorized by Jonathan E. Schroeder (forthcoming) – has been around since the invention of the personal camera and affordable film. In the digital age, the snapshot has become a key mode of communication for many socially networked individuals, who use sites such as Instagram and Facebook to record and publish a visual record of their lives. Easily caricatured as people who "tweet it rather than eat it" (in reference to their predilection to take artfully filtered photographs of their lunch or dinner before eating it), Instagrammers have made both an art form and a social movement out of their snapshots. Apps such as Instagram (which had more than 7 million users in its first year of operation (Aguayo & Calvert 2013, 181) allow one to not only send out a feed of images snapped from one's smart phone, but also to receive a stream of images from other individuals, including celebrities and unknowns. As such, the snapshot has evolved from an analogue form into a torrent of digital images, which are circulated around the globe producing a kind of hypervisibility. Most Instagram feeds are public: anyone can log on to the URL and look at the snapshots that someone has posted, or search for hashtags, such as #lunch in order to see what visual records of that theme

have been created by the snapshot-making community. In particular, self-portrait snapshots, which have been rebranded in the vernacular of the online world as "selfies" are a sub-genre extremely common in the spaces of social networking, and represent a new moment in "photography as everyday practice and way of life" (Aguayo & Calvert, 2013: 181). On my Instagram, when I searched for "#selfie" the results offered almost 47,000,000 self-portraits, all of strangers who have their Instagram profiles open to public view.

The selfie is a very interesting type of snapshot. In it, individuals often represent themselves as at the peak of their own attractiveness, and then use this image either as a profile image, or put it out into the public realm through, for example, their Instagram feed. The selfie is a way of saying, "look at me", out loud, in a public domain, it is about getting attention but also about crafting the self as an object in a very particular way. Like all snapshots, selfies are "predictable in content and conservative in style" but also are "capable of inducing a photographic experience that can be intensely individual" (Batchen 2008, 133). Snapshot self-portraits, such as vintage prints with the word "me" and a place and date written on the back, declare "I was here!" (Batchen 2008, 135). Selfies function more to claim, "I'm here!" (Myers, 2010: 274). Clichéd as snapshots are (Berger, 2011), the "democratic" (or as Bourdieu, 1996, would phrase it, "middle-brow") nature of mobile phone photography, allows individuals to make a claim for their presence in social life through a visual form, controlled by themselves though mediated through the aesthetics of Instagram (or whichever app is being used). Selfies "reflect the view of our selves that we want to project out into the world" (Gye 2007, 282). "

> We use snapshots to communicate to ourselves, and those around us, and those who will succeed us, that we in fact exist. With snapshots we become our own historians, and through them we proclaim and affirm our existence (Jacobs, 1981: 104).

Selfies are an under-studied media form, although they have received some attention in the critical blogosphere. Blogger Sarah Gram (2013) argues that

selfies are a genre used most by young women, and as such they are a "ticket into the world of consumer capitalism". Rejecting the claim that selfies are pure narcisissm, Gram argues that the selfie represents a form of labor, in which young girls in particular turn themselves into objects (commodities) in order to claim themselves as valuable in a cultural system (capitalism) which considers them valuable only in certain ways (as sexy bodies and pretty faces). As Enli & Thumim (2012, 99) ask, it is important to ask whether self-representations in social media challenge, uphold or alter dominant media representations. Answering this question in relation to selfies requires a more detailed study than is possible in this paper. For the time being it is worth noting a couple of generic characteristics of selfies: they are taken either at arms length or in a mirror, as such they are typically relatively close up pictures, they present the subject/self in a way that is considered attractive, good-looking or sexy by that subject, and they are entirely under the control of the photographer/subject.

Jones (2002, 950) argues that self-portraiture is a "technology of embodiment" in which a performance of the self is exaggerated. Selfies are consumer media forms in two ways. Firstly, all users of Facebook and Instagram (and similar applications) are enrolled, knowingly or not, in a corporate owned service which is ultimately profit oriented and sells advertising space (Instagram does not do it yet, but it is owned by Facebook, so the shift to advertising sales is likely inevitable). Secondly, the self-portraits turn the image of the self into a commodity that is make public and consumable by others, projecting personal images into collective space and literally "sharing" very widely self-produced messages.

Between the spectacle and the public: Spaces of appearance

This paper now moves to consider what we can learn about how consumer media are public from considering each of these examples. Billboards, magazine covers and selfies are arguably quite different. The first two genres are "classic" analogue media forms that invite little active participation from the viewer, and manifest capital's power to project its values brightly and loudly into public

space, arguably dominating and eclipsing other values. As such, billboards and magazine covers are perhaps most easily defined as "spectacles", with little public mandate other than their exploitation of that public. Selfies, on the other hand, rooted as they are in participatory cultures of new media forms, can be characterized as a significant form of self-expression, in which power lies in the hands of the users rather than the owners of the social networking or image-sharing site. In order to problematize both of these arguments (that billboards and magazine covers maliciously exploit the public, while selfies produce it), it is necessary to examine existing arguments about the spectacle and the public with relation to media forms.

Consumer media spectacles: Manipulation through the visual

Guy Debord (1967) famously argued that capital had produced the spectacle (that is, the entertainment and media industries) in order to lull the masses into a soporific stupor, distract them from the realities of social injustice, and dazzle and entertain them into inaction. Marxist aesthetics argues that lived experience has become consumed by an accumulation of images, or a "spectacle" that distracts the masses from "the age of power's totalitarian rule over the conditions of existence" (Debord, 1967/1994: 19; see also Haug, 1982; 1987). This pessimistic view is echoed by Baudrillard (1988), who argued that the symbolic properties of commodities (indeed, informational commodities themselves) have displaced the significance of the material. In fact, the "Marxist left" and the "Semiotic left" (Lash and Urry, 1994: 31) share the view that informational commodities construct a manipulative dystopia serving the profit-oriented interests of capital, rather than a shared public, in which everyone's views and ideas count.

> Consumer culture offers a dazzling array of goods and services that induce individuals to participate in a system of commercial gratification. Media and consumer culture work hand in hand to generate thought and behaviour that conform to existing values, institutions, beliefs and practices (Kellner 1995: 3).

From this perspective, even selfies are a part of the spectacle. Having cleverly evolved in order to deliver a feeling of empowerment, in that individuals are generating and sharing their own images of themselves, the spectacle has arguably completely taken over even self-presentation. Instead of genuine self-expression, of ideas, debates, arguments (presented in visual form), selfies arguably show how individual agency has been shaped by the power of consumerist mediation. Why else would it be so important, to so many people, to show themselves looking groomed, pretty, and fit in a collective self-portrait of millions of faces, all of which serve as evidence for good consumption?

Kellner (1995, 69) argues that the spectacle "empowers audiences" in that it provides "a momentary sense of mastery and power, compensating for the decline of power in everyday life." Writing well before the age of the digital selfie, and focusing on the entertainment industry, Kellner attempts to show how visual culture (including blockbuster films, adverts and more), merely "hides ideological content" with "fast editing, dazzling high-tech images, and narrative excitement" (Kellner 1995, 69). Meaning and identity have collapsed, he claims, precisely due to technological advancements that deliver pleasure, fulfillment and distraction at the expense of any real agency. In the digital age, media diets are increasingly filled with much more interactive pleasures. As well as consuming film and television shows, consumers produce digital versions of their self-identities through social networking platforms in which empty frameworks are provided which are filled in with user-generated content. Although there is doubtless agency being exercised, arguably the trite content of most Facebook profiles and Instagram feeds supports, rather than negates, arguments about the operations of the spectacle. "Postmodern identity is a function of leisure and is grounded in play, in gamesmanship, in producing an image" (Kellner 1995, 242). Kellner's work is a good example of how commercial media forms have been treated as spectacles, as pure image, in which identity is exploded and postmodern values shape the world of the image. Although he does examine the nuances of the tension between how the spectacle can empower and

alienate, he does not critically explore what the public nature of the spectacle *means.*

Although theories of the spectacle have had much influence in the field of media studies, their numerous weaknesses compelled theorists concerned with the transformative potential of the media to look elsewhere for conceptual frameworks. Most notably, the idea of the spectacle is weak in that it is one-dimensional. As Cottle (2003, 420) summarises, even though the spectacle is an important organizing principle, it gives a "totalizing impression", lacks "analytical precision" and "tends towards a presumed explanatory self-sufficiency located at the level of the cultural". While it very effectively critiques the power of visual culture, and the strong relation of commercially produced images to the political-economy of media, the spectacle ignores the agency involved in spectatorship. The focus on the power of the image comes at the expense of considering what it means to look, and how visibility is always linked to looking. It is this important to consider the extent to which spectatorship (of texts produced by capital, or those produced by citizens using tools provided by capital) can be theorized as a form of participation.

Media publics: The conceptual longing for participation

The spectacle cannot exist apart from the spectator. And, "one cannot be a spectator without reference to a public" (Dayan, 2001: 744). How then, to theorise the spectating (versus the spectacular) public? And, what possibility for participation might this public hold? Dayan defines 'publics' as groupings of audiences, and questions whether they can be "totally separate from [the concept] of the 'public domain' and therefore from processes of public debate" (Dayan, 2001: 744). As a noun, a public refers to "a relatively recognizable grouping" as an adjective it refers to behaviours that are the opposite of private, which are in "the public eye" (Dayan, 2001: 744). Publics, continues Dayan, are seen as well as seeing, they are watched (by marketers and governments) as well as actively watching. A public is "characterized by a style of performance. This performance may be either consensual or provocative, but on no account can it

be invisible" (Dayan, 2001: 744). By knowing itself to be seen, a public presents itself, it "strikes some sort of pose" (Dayan, 2001: 744). In these ways, Dayan argues a public "is not condemned to silence" (Dayan 2001, 745).

These ideas go against arguments about the "politics of the spectacle", which treats public life as a theatre rather than a forum for debate (Scannell, 2001: 700). Against this performative, spectacular idea of the public is the much-used notion of the public sphere (Habermas, 1992). Habermas' influential account of the rise and fall of the public sphere was organized around notion of "independent discussion and rational critique of public affairs" and developed it into "a conception of public opinion as something to be measured and manipulated" (Outhwaite, 2003: 232). It is important to note that Habermas' thinking was shaped by a Western Marxist agenda and that he "fully shared […] Adorno and Horkheimer's concern with the way in which enlightenment, in the form of instrumental rationality, turns form a means of liberation into a new source of enslavement" (Outhwaite, 2003: 240). As such, Habermas' idealistic vision of the dialogic public sphere is compromised by his pessimistic vision of the ways in which it corrupted (or, "refeudalised") by capital. A strong theme in critical theory's treatment of consumer and commercial media has been to claim that they are merely spectacles in Debord's sense. From this perspective, consumer media are simply public screens onto which a variety of glittering, distracting images are projected. Habermas himself argued that the rise of capitalist media was in fact a contribution to the disintegration of the public sphere. Building on Frankfurt School arguments about the ways in which entertainment media stupefied the masses, Habermas' claim was that not only did commercial media discourage political participation, but that they undermined it altogether.

In political theory, 'public' usually defined against 'private' and 'market' (Corner 2009, 143). Further, the argument is made there there is a "good" and the "bad" public. The former is Habermasian, and refers to social "cohesion and collective values" the latter hints at the spectacular, which is framed as a discrepancy between the ideals of the good public and realities of inequality. (Corner 2009,

143). Drawing on Habermas' arguments about the fall of the public sphere, Corner claims that "market-related models of the 'popular' have placed [pressure] on ideas of the 'public' and on the flows and forms of public knowledge" (Corner 2009, 147). From this perspective, it is precisely the visibility of ideas linked with individualism, consumption and commodities that have contributed to the destruction of an idealized, dialogic public sphere.

In media studies, the concept of the public sphere has been extremely influential. Peter Lunt and Sonia Livingstone (2013) provide an authoritative summary of the history of the "the rise and rise of the public sphere" (Lunt and Livingstone, 2013: 87) and the relevance of the concept to media studies. As a member of the Frankfurt School, Habermas saw capitalism as a threat to democracy, and considered the rise in literacy and printing and distribution technologies as an opportunity to form public opinion that could facilitate truly democratic discussion (Lunt and Livingstone, 2013: 89). Setting media industries and democratic communication against each other, the Habermasian public sphere therefore "saw the rise of political apathy as linked to the rise of consumer society, and the loss of political consciousness as due to individualization" (Lunt and Livingstone, 2013: 89). The fall of the public sphere, according to Habermas, was linked to the transformation of media spaces from opportunities to participate through dialogue in matters of shared concern into instruments of political power (Lunt and Livingstone, 2013: 89). Habermas considered "publicity" a strategy used by the powerful to "secure for themselves a kind of plebiscitary acclamation" (Outhwaite 1994: 10). Instead of being a space in which the "formations of plural solidarities" (Cottle, 2006: 411) takes place, the public becomes compromised by "modern forms of mediated publicness, where the powerful parade once again their power before a communicatively emasculated audience" (Cottle, 2006: 411). This "critique of the media and its contemporary propensity to ritual display and spectacle" (Cottle, 2006: 412) is set up directly against the ideal of a participatory public – and consumer culture is fingered as the culprit for the loss of that possibility.

The public sphere has been debated and developed in other ways. Fraser (1990) and other feminist thinkers critiqued the patriarchal bias of Habermas' construct. Others have critiqued "the universal or singular idea of the public sphere" and claim that it "has largely been rejected in favour of a plurality of counter- and sub-public spheres, conceptualized as various differentiated arenas of public action or communicating political views as well as social experiences" (Karppinen 2007: 498).

Despite the arguments about the appropriation or decline of the public sphere, and the many critiques of it, the concept has remained central in much research to do with audiences (often also conceptualized as publics), as well as to do with public service broadcasting. Lunt and Livingstone are concerned with how Habermas' ideals are relevant for "institutions acting in the public sphere" (Lunt and Livingstone, 2013: 94-5). They note that how such institutions conceptualize the audience matters, and note that one possible form of address is when audiences are "treated as the liberal individual (or consumer, making choices and expressing preferences)" (Lunt and Livingstone, 2013: 95). In consumer societies, the majority of institutions who have the power to address large audiences are profit-oriented media companies. As such, they emphasize the notion of consumer identity over other forms of citizenship and public participation. As valuable as notions of public participation have been to media studies, and as much as they should continue to be theorized in such a way as to contribute to the conceptualization of certain genres of media institutions (such as public broadcasters), we also need a conceptual language that can be employed in order to critique, precisely, what it means when audiences are treated almost always as liberal individuals, and almost never as participants in political processes that contribute to social justice or political betterment.

Possibilities for participation: How public can consumer media get?

There are those scholars that concern themselves with serious "political" issues, such as public service broadcasting and the democratic potential of new media, and then there are those scholars that concern themselves with "the spectacle" –

celebrity culture, consumption and so on. Implicit in this division is a sense that in order to employ critical theory in order to study consumer media, it is necessary to balance efforts to deconstruct how certain meanings are prioritized in those texts with audience and anthropological work that shows how individuals exercise their agency in their choices about what to consume, and the ways in which they harness media and communications technologies and channels in order to construct and project particular narratives about who they are and what they value. Scholars who work on consumer media are not expected to need or use public sphere theory. Because celebrity magazines, glossy TV shows and Instagrams feeds are usually not explicitly political in their content, there is a sense that public sphere theory is not relevant – *even though these texts are explicitly understood to be public in some way or another*.

How can public media spaces facilitate – or conversely dampen – opportunities for members of a society to participate in making decisions about matters of common concern, such as the cleanliness of their environments or how their affairs are governed? To what extent do media spaces invite human actors to involve themselves in affairs that matter to the collective, and to what extent do communications technologies encourage a focus on the self and the personal and/or materialistic attitudes to life? Such questions have been at the core of research in the field of media studies for as long as the scholarly field has been in formation. This section makes an argument that by conceptualizing consumer media as "spaces of appearance", it is possible to transcend both the limits of participatory theory and the dismissiveness of critical theory. Interestingly, in much scholarship on postmodern culture, the spectacle is taken for granted and the public not engaged with very closely. Usually the public is referred to inasmuch as the supposed divisions between the public and private are broken down, and the extent to which certain forms of expression exist in visible ways. And in much scholarship on the public, the spectacular is engaged with only insofar as it is used as a scapegoat for mourning the decline of the potential for true democratic engagement.

To some extent, Lunt and Livingstone's argument re-inscribes the participatory notion of the public sphere, even though they acknowledge the limitations of the concept. This perspective has deep theoretical roots and makes an absolutely vital contribution to important debates about how media technologies and institutions can and should conceptualize their role in democratic processes. However, for scholars with an interest in critically examining media forms defined by their obvious connections with neoliberal capital and consumer culture, precisely so as to be able to contribute to the critique of those power structures, it can be difficult to work out where, precisely, the notion of the public sphere fits in to that critical agenda. Its not a simple as saying that the "classic" notion of the public sphere was fragmented by the rise of capitalist media. Neither is it as simple as claiming that a "revised" version of the public sphere (which Lunt and Livingstone present) is most suited to orienting and framing critical work that seeks to make sense of how public institutions should do their work, or how other forms of media may or may not facilitate some kind of participatory space in which individuals access the resources, mental or material, to imagine themselves as citizens rather than consumers. Media institutions and genres which claim absolutely no indebtedness to a public agenda are also nevertheless in some way public.

Elsewhere, building on the work of Arendt (1958), Silverstone (1999; 2005) and Chouliaraki (2006a; 2006b; 2008; 2010), I argue (Iqani, 2012) that consumer media texts, which I define as media texts which are produced by profit-making entities with the aim of generating further profit and which engage with, construct and re-construct a view of the world in which all social and cultural relations are mediated by commodities, various forms of consumption, and a general naturalization of market exchange, are public in that they are "spaces of appearance" which make certain ideas and values visible at the expense of others. That characteristic of "making visible" is the primary way in which consumer media texts are public. While there may be some potential for participatory action, such as writing in to a magazine, applying to feature on a reality TV show, or even radically defacing an advert, media spaces such as billboards, bling reality makeover TV shows and glossy magazines are not public

in the "public sphere" sense. They are public in the sense in which they have shone a spotlight on something – a pair of shoes, a celebrity, a lifestyle, a sportscar, a celebrity – not in which they have invited all "consumer-citizens" to have a debate about the public value of such things.

Billboards are easily criticized as spectacles. Produced by capital in order to aggressively sell and promote its commodities and brands, billboards take over public space and operate as public screens that project the messages of capital: "buy this, want that, be like this, desire like that". As such, arguably billboards lack participatory potential entirely. Even those advertisements that attempt to integrate social messaging only do so in order to push a certain brand image. For example, the fashion brand Benetton has famously used social issues such as AIDS to develop its profile as a "cosmopolitan" brand. This kind of "public" agenda would be seen as fake and manipulative by Habermas. As Chouliaraki summarises, "Habermas maintains a concern with the ways in which today's corporate media turn questions of justice and solidarity from objects of rational discourse into spectacles for consumption" (Chouliaraki, 2013a: 109). The main implication of this, Chouliaraki continues, referring to Habermas (1992) is that mass media are considered incapable of participating in the "communicative processes of the public sphere" because "media aesthetics" are already corroded by 'the manipulative deployment of media power to procure mass loyalty and consumer demand" (Chouliaraki, 2013a: 109). Despite the strength of the Habermasian position, Chouliaraki critiques it by pointing out that it privileges "a rationalist interpretation of the Enlightenment over a moral-aesthetic one" – which denigrates ALL media aesthetics as inauthentic and (Chouliaraki, 2013a: 110). This ignores the real potential that media aesthetics have of turning "a spectacle of suffering into a moral claim to solidarity" (Chouliaraki, 2013a: 112) – what then might the potential be for turning a spectacle of consumption into a moral claim for something different (intended or otherwise)? For example, consider the massive billboard attached to two sides of the Anglo American building in downtown Johannesburg. Facing the highway ringing the city, the billboard shows the closely cropped portraits of two miners. With serious expressions, the men look out on the city and passing commuters. The billboard

was surely intended to send a message that the company cared about and respected its workers, and put their needs and interests at the centre of its work ethic. With continued unrest in the mining sector, the Marikana massacre and the reshaping of the union landscape in South Africa, that billboard could now easily be read in a way that was most likely not intended by the corporation: as a call to solidarity with mine workers and a constant reminder of the injustices that they face and fight on a daily basis in South Africa.

Magazine covers, although also spectacular in the sense in which they rely on a bright-eyed optimism, hyperreal modes of communication and fantastical set of aesthetics, continually invite certain modes of participation, both psychological and social. Rather than one-dimensionally pushing products and brands, such messages are interwoven with numerous invitations to consider inter-personal relationships, the ethics of work, self-development, and consumption, and the meaning of pleasure. As such, Debord's claim that "there is no place left where people can discuss the realities which concern them, because they can never lastingly free themselves from the crushing presence of media discourse and of the various forces organized to relay it" (Debord, 1987: 9-10). Magazine discourses, as distilled in the call out lines and images on their covers, are not only concerned with pushing commodities and selfish forms of consumption. Although of course they do these things, they do sometimes often invite a more critical form of social awareness and participation, and also stand as invitations to dialogue about the issues being made visible.

Selfies occupy an interesting place, quite explicitly, between the spectacle and participation. In terms of the latter, digital self-portraits are controlled by the user/photographer on almost every level. They get to choose how to frame and capture their image, how to crop and filter it and where to post it. As such, the selfie represents a moment of complete agency and self-expression which is almost certainly pleasurable and meaningful, otherwise why would so many people do it? Chouliaraki (2010: 227) argues that new technological platforms for self-expression allow for the "mediated participation of ordinary people in public culture", which is a "new terrain of democratization". Instead of being

force-fed images of skinny celebrites in mainstream media, individuals can present themselves in all their individual glory, and enjoy looking at other "normal" people presented in their selfie feeds. However, Chouliaraki cautions that we should remain aware the technologies of self-expression are "embedded within the regulative regimes of the market or the state" (Chouliaraki, 2010: 227). Although they can make the ordinary publicly visible, and make important claims to recognition, optimism about self-mediation should be problematised by an acknowledgement of "the appropriation of self-mediation by market forces in the service of private profit or state control" (Chouliaraki, 2010: 229).

An extremely critical, some might say offensively patronizing, perspective on selfies would claim that they represent the extension of the spectacle into minutiae of everyday life and the bodily technologies of self. If Baudrillard argued that television turned skin into a 'smooth and functional surface of communication' (Baudrillard 1988: 19) and our bodies into 'monitoring screens' (Baudrillard 1988: 27), his view on selfies might have been even more pessimistic. Are they simply examples of individual subjectivity moulding itself into the image of the ideal consumer (well-groomed, attractive, sexy and docile, just as capital wants us)? Do selfies express personality, or erase it as "the fatal accompaniment to an existence which is concretely submission to the spectacle's rules, ever more removed from the possibility of authentic experience and thus from the discover of individual preferences" (Debord, 1987: 14). Are selfies merely evidence of how the spectacle has conquered even individual subjectivity and expression, in which self-documentation actually an expression of profound alienation (Retort, 2005: 181-2)?

Although the pessimistic argument about selfies is compelling to some extent, it is limited in that is undermines real agency and claims to recognition. As Chouliaraki (2010: 228) points out, in self-mediation a "performative conception of publicness" comes to the fore, in which appearance is recognized as equally important to participation. Building on Arendt's concept of the public as a "space of appearance", Chouliaraki argues that the normative public sphere model overrelies on "linguistic rationalism" at the expense of visual recognition. Making

oneself visible in a way controlled by oneself is important not only in terms of agency and subjectivity, but in terms of rethinking what citizenship means and how it can be discursively constituted in the public realm. Self-produced images and texts "do not simply represent pre-existing selves, individual or collective, but constitute such selves in the very process of representing them (Chouliaraki, 2010: 229).

To what extent is participation made possible in the billboard, the magazine cover and the snapshot, respectively? My argument is not that participation is possible or impossible, but that it is not the primary concept by which we are able to make sense of such media spaces, despite their very obviously public nature. Although to some extent it might be stating the obvious to claim that firstly, such consumer media spaces are public, and secondly that they do not necessarily facilitate participation, it is necessary to then theorise how such media spaces are public, and what the implications of that are for contributions to critical theory. This paper argues that by neglecting to acknowledge the limits of public sphere theory in the context of certain media forms – which are becoming more and more ubiquitous in contemporary society – media scholars are losing an opportunity to actually critique the regimes of power that produces certain types of publicity, but not others. Must we always be trapped between the binaries of an idealistic image of political participation and a pessimistic narrative of hyper-visibility in the style of the spectacle? What kinds of participation might spectacular media such as billboards and magazines covers produce or invite? And what kinds of spectacularity might 'participatory' media such as the comment feed on news articles or citizen journalist produce and invite? Chouliaraki's (2010; 2013a) work in particular provides an alternative set of conceptual vocabularies for working with these questions.

Between the spectacular and the participatory: Concluding thoughts

This paper has asked what dialogic theories of the public sphere and the concept of the manipulative spectacle can do for us in an age in which, arguably, regimes of consumption, celebrity, and commodity culture are gaining increasing traction

across the globe – albeit in unique formations in each cultural and geographic context. In the past decade or so, critical observers of the role of media in culture and society have observed the "commercialization" and glossification of the news market (Oliver, 2011), the celebritisation of politics (Chouliaraki, 2013b), international aid (Vestergaard, 2008), charity and public health, the brandification of humanitarian organisations, politicians and educational institutions, the commodification of almost every conceivable social issue, from Nike's "global girl" campaign to Bono's stance on HIV-Aids, and a trend in which individuals manage and commodify their very personalities through the creation of "online identities" in a variety of social networking spaces (Wang, 2012). In a world in which it seems that nothing is immune from the reach of corporate and commercial power, what kinds of conceptual resources can we draw upon in order to think through what the public realm means, and how the power of the spectacle intersects with normative ideals of participation? What kinds of publics are being created by these arguably extremely powerful modes of communication, almost all of them, without fail, rooted in some profit-oriented project?

This paper has contributed the following to the project of theorizing the public in the context of consumer media studies. Firstly, it has contributed an additional perspective to the already well-developed body of work on the limits of public sphere theory. Secondly, it has highlighted the particular ways in which consumer media are public, which goes beyond the notion that they are just manipulative specatcles. Thirdly, it has experimented with applying the notion of 'space of appearance' to commercial media forms as an analytical framework.

As such, the paper has engaged with a conceptual vocabulary with which consumer media spaces and mediated practices shaped by consumption can in fact be critically theorized. These recent contributions to theories of the public in the context of mediated culture are organized around a return to Hannah Arendt's notion of the public realm as one that is comprised of both participation and appearance. A focus on the latter notion, neglected by many public sphere theorists, but recently re-animated by Roger Silverstone and then Lilie

Chouliaraki, allows us to integrate a critical vocabulary on the publicness of texts like billboards, magazines covers and snapshots, with an analysis of their visual interpolation in the media landscape. Arguably, we can think of consumer media as public spaces of appearance which operate on a continuum between appearance and participation.

The three media genres discussed in this paper are quite clearly public in some way: the billboard intervenes into shared urban spaces, alongside highways or on buildings in cities; the magazine cover is the outward facing element of the magazine which is typically on display in retail space in cities and towns in the global north, and streetside vendors in cities in the global south; and the snapshot has always been shared in one way or another, with social networking sites such as Facebook and Instagram facilitating the very public streaming of such images to audiences much wider than simply the small group of family and friends who might have enjoyed the Kodak slideshow in the living room. These three examples were introduced in order to argue that the critical analysis of such empirical phenomena, which are quite obviously public, but perhaps not quite in a way that facilitates dialogue, communicative participation, and rational exchange, can contribute to theories of the public in general, and that we need to take the "consumerist" form of the public seriously in order to develop our critique of capitalist power.

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