Cultivating self-belief and educated hope:
toward a contemporary radical democratic practical theory of and for transformative art

Dr Joel Lazarus,
Paper presented at Inaugural Conference on Cultural Political Economy,
University of Lancaster,
Sept 1-2, 2015

Introduction

The relationship between art and politics has been explored within the Western philosophical canon as far back as Plato. In more recent decades, critical theorists have made inexpressibly important and influential contributions to understanding and developing this relationship. In light of this, I seek to make a modest contemporary contribution to this crucial issue.

If being a critical social theorist means espousing a philosophy of praxis[1] then the question of the most effective way of contributing to social transformation, to the goal of social justice, should be one at the forefront of our minds. I argue here that while cultural critique, the deconstruction of hegemonic 'truths' and their manufacture, is a vital starting point, it is also important for critical scholars to explore the possibilities within their scholarship for cultural *re*construction and *re*creation. This, I believe, constitutes the most powerful form of resistance. The most effective way to disprove that 'There Is No Alternative'[2] is to create alternatives. It is for this reason that I myself as a critical scholar seek to engage with artists who try to do just that. Whether one is motivated more by a desire to help as wide an audience as possible learn about the political economy of social injustice or to participate in imagining and creating social alternatives, I believe that there is much to gain from listening to and learning from artists. This paper is informed by the beginnings of a dialogue with artists of various types: visual artists, filmmakers, playwrights, and performers.

I begin by making a case for art as the primary force driving social change and for the rightful position of artists in the vanguard of processes of social transformation. In responding to how social scientists can help artists, I offer an embryonic radical democratic and contemporary practical theory for transformative art. To do this I will first need to sketch the cultural-political-economic conditions that artists and social scientists find themselves in today.

Art and artists in the vanguard

My argument for giving primacy to the force of art and the position of artist in the transformative process is initially pedagogical. If a prerequisite of personal and collective transformation is a learning experience that invites us to rethink our understanding of self and society then I believe that only learning experiences that effect *compelling emotional responses* can help to initiate such changes. I are informed here by a pedagogical theory and practice inspired by Paolo Freire that recognises that '[e]motion is linked to motivation. Only on issues about which they feel strongly will people be prepared to act' (Hope & Timmel 1999: 53). If this is so then it is hard to deny the superior ability of art to achieve an *initial* compelling emotional connection far more forcefully and effectively than social theory. I use the word 'compelling' here in two main ways. First, a 'compelling' work of art is, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, one that 'evokes interest, attention, or admiration in a powerfully irresistible way'. Second, I have in mind how a work of art can offer a compelling *argument* or *vision* – one that is 'not able to be refuted' and 'inspweres conviction'.[3] In contrast to art's compelling potential, we must recognise that in our specific contemporary social conditions, in which ideas about theory, intellectuality, even education evoke pejorative social connotations and even personal trauma, attempts at effecting social change that begin with social theory or research are likely even to be counterproductive. In short, *all* encounters provoke an emotional response within us. However, I argue for the primacy of art in producing the kind of compelling emotional responses that can achieve that initial reopening effect required for rethinking and recreating ourselves and society. The practical theory I offer later in this paper offers some guiding principles for radical democratic artistic practice aimed at creating the compelling emotional responses needed to facilitate social

---

[1] I refer primarily here, of course, to Marx's final Thesis on Feuerbach when he states that: 'Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.' See https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.htm.

[2] This refers, of course, to the maxim attributed to Margaret Thatcher.

[3] See http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/compelling. I hasten to add that I would not myself define compelling in such absolute terms regarding the 'indisputability' of any argument or vision.

transformation. These principles may be broadly unchanging. However, it is vital to ground this theoretical contribution within an overview of the contemporary cultural-political-economic conditions for artists and the production of art here in the UK. Critical theory can never be abstracted from actual social conditions.

In the next section, I highlight the commodification, economisation, and attempted bureaucratisation of cultural production and the 'creative industries'; the attempt by capital to control and exploit the decentralisation and potentially emancipatory developments in cultural production facilitated by the Internet, and the all too often impoverished and precarious material conditions of artists today. I offer a brief analysis of the current permanent crisis of capital and highlight the saddening widespread psychosocial conditions that confront us. Based on this depressing analysis, I argue that any contemporary theory of and for transformative art must focus on how to cultivate personal and collective self-belief and educated hope as its point of departure.

An overview of the current conditions for artists and the production of art

The culture industry and the society of the spectacle
The culture industry

My focus here is primarily on the stwell dominant forms of mass cultural production and consumption, namely television, cinema/film, and the mainstream internet. I begin with two post-war contributions to theorising mass culture that remain enduring, and perhaps increasingly, relevant and influential, namely Theodor Adorno (and Max Horkheimer's) ([1972] 2001) 'Culture Industry' and Guy Debord's 'Society of the Spectacle' ([1967] 2014).

Adorno pioneered analysis of the nature and consequences of the burgeoning yet centralising post-war 'culture industry'. For Adorno, the overall product of the culture industry proved to be 'the prevailing ideology of our time' (ibid: 443). Its ultimate effect was 'one of anti-enlightenment', a 'means for fettering consciousness' and 'imped[ing] the development of autonomous, independent individuals who judge and decide consciously for themselves' and who would be 'the precondition for a democracy society' (ibid: 300). A central technology for achieving this was the 'ubiquitous' 'standardization' of output and 'stereotyping' of narratives, social conditions, and characters (ibid: 473). Mass produced television and cinema was there to produce within people a 'substitute gratification' that actually 'cheated them out of the same happiness which it deceitfully projects' (ibid: 300). It functioned to provide the 'amusement under late capitalism' that merely constituted 'the prolongation of work' and the 'escape from the mechanized work process' that gave the masses 'the strength in order to be able to cope with it again' (ibid: 27).

The claim that the contemporary culture industry merely gives the masses what they want is, for Adorno, first and foremost, simply factually incorrect. We, 'the masses', 'are not primary, but secondary'; we are 'objects of calculation', 'an appendage of the machinery'. 'The customer is not king, as the culture industry would have us believe, not its subject but its object' (ibid: 280). Moreover, such a claim expresses a depoliticised free-market conceptualisation of democracy that entirely ignores the immense and growing power imbalances structuring contemporary social relations expressed within mass media structures themselves. Like any attempt at depoliticisation, such a claim, like the culture industry itself, serves to reify ever more deeply the social status quo:

> 'The conformity to the consumer, on the contrary, which likes to masquerade as humanitarianism, is nothing but the economic technique of consumer exploitation...That is why the culture industry is not the art of the consumer but rather the projection of the will of those in control onto their victims. The automatic self-reproduction of the status quo in its established forms is itself an expression of domination' (ibid: 511).

For Adorno, we the consumers, the spectators of the culture industry's output are rendered increasingly passive and unthinking as we are served up the same 'pre-digested' 'baby food' endlessly

repackaged as novelty (ibid: 192) that not only requires no thinking but actively banishes thinking in favour of instantaneous escapist pleasure:

> 'The effectiveness of the culture industry depends not on its parading an ideology, on disguising the true nature of things, but in removing the thought that there is any alternative to the status quo. 'Pleasure always means not to think about anything, to forget suffering even where it is shown.' Hence, pleasure is always flight 'from the last remaining thought of resistance'; the liberation promised by amusement 'is freedom from thought and negation' (Bernstein in Adorno 2001: 36)

Here, a central theme of Adorno's (and Horkheimer's) work resounds: 'Instrumental rationality in the form of the culture industry thus turns against reason and the reasoning subject. This silencing of reflection is the substantial irrationality of enlightened reason' (ibid: 36).

Leaving critique of their analysis aside for now, Adorno's interpellation and analysis of the culture industry has, if anything, only grown in importance in the shadow of today's globalised mass media industry.

The society of the spectacle
Theodor Adorno offers us precious little empirical analysis of the inner form and functioning of the 'industry' he identifies. However, the subject of Guy Debord's 1967 mesmerising construction – the 'Spectacle' - is even more abstracted. Indeed, rather than subject, the Spectacle is a 'social relation among people, mediated by images' (Debord [1967] 2014: 133). Our spectacular society is one in which 'the commodity has attained the total occupation of social life'. This (near-)totalised commodification of human experience is 'spectacular' because our experience of reality is overwhelmingly mediated semiotically via communications systems.

> 'In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation' (ibid: 132)

Central to the spectacle's power is its universality or its 'monopoly of appearance' that naturalises its presence and influence and produces a widespread 'passive acceptance': 'The spectacle presents itself as something enormously positive, indisputable and inaccessible. It says nothing more than "that which appears is good, that which is good appears' (ibid: 145)

Drawing heavily on Marx's theory of abstracted and alienated relations of labour and commodity production within capitalism, Guy Debord saw 'separation' as the 'alpha and omega of the spectacle' – a separation institutionalised within 'the social division of labour, the formation of classes' that 'had given rise to a first sacred contemplation, the mythical order with which every power shrouds itself from the beginning' (ibid: 152)

> 'The spectacle originates in the loss of the unity of the world, and the gigantic expansion of the modern spectacle expresses the totality of this loss' (ibid: 158).

The spectacle is also 'the existing order's uninterrupted discourse about itself, its laudatory monologue. It is the self-portrait of power in the epoch of its totalitarian management of the conditions of existence' (ibid: 149). This combination of the spectacle's monopoly of appearance, monological character, but fundamentally divisive function led Debord to argue that 'the spectacle reunites the separate, but reunites it as separate' (ibid: 152).

Debord's vision has been hugely influential and does offer us a compelling, albeit disempowering, vision of an omnipresent, omnipotent, omnivoracious structure that we maintain, constantly feed, yet which ensures our eternal separation. Again, I will critique the theory of spectacular society later. The goal here was merely to frame the dominant critical influences on thinking about culture and politics.

I turn now to one central development in cultural production that seems to have certainly contributed to increasing the power and reach of the Spectacle.

The creative economy and cultural capitalism
The 'creative industries'
What we have witnessed over the past two decades in the area of cultural production is a process all too familiar to those of us working in higher education – the concomitant commodification, economisation, and bureaucratisation of cultural production.

It was the new 'New' Labour government who, from the late 1990s, reconstructed 'culture' and 'creativity' and charged it with a particularly heavy burden. The new and nebulous (and, ultimately, undefinable) 'creative industries' were to serve as key drivers for economic growth, urban regeneration, social mobility, nation-building, and ideological (spectacular?) production in Blair's Britain. This move, above all, was material - 'Cultural policy became part of economic policy. Culture was an industry, and its products a commodity' (Hewison 2014: 43) – and it entailed a Faustian pact between artists and the state:

> 'The 'creative industries' idea brought creativity from the back door of government, where it had sat for decades holding out the tin cup for arts subsidy – miserable, self-loathing and critical (especially of the hand that fed it), but unwilling to change – around to the front door, where it was introduced to the wealth-creating portfolios, the emergent industry departments, and the enterprise support programmes...There would be a charge for entering the Treasury by the front door, one that compromised the very creativity that the Department for Culture, Media, and Sport (DCMS) claimed to be encouraging. In future, Creative Britain would have to carry a clipboard, and submit to the managerialism that contradicted the very idea of creativity.'

The requirement of politicians and bureaucrats to make artistic and aesthetic judgments based on political and economic calculations led to the imposition and development of technologies of 'new public managerialism' and quantitative indicators and targets. Consequently, we have seen over these past two decades, the political-economic instrumentalisation and bureaucratisation of those state and state-funded bodies such as the DCMS and the Arts Council. This development reflects Adorno's (2001: 316) own prescient analysis which foresaw an 'obligatory increase of administrative control in regions in which administration is without objective competence'.

Ultimately, as Robert Hewison argues, the very creativity that New Labour believed would serve as engine of economic, political, and social revival was undermined by the bureaucratic machine it constructed to manage it. Culture's 'sacrosanct irrationality' was transgressed by the rational irrationality of administration (Adorno 2001: 316). Nonetheless, New Labour's legacy of managerialism, politicisation, and commodification of cultural production has outlived its creators. The scope for commodification and political control has, superficially at least, only greatly increased in the resource scarce conditions of post-crisis austerity Britain.

Cultural capitalism
This reference to a 'superficial' increase in the scope for the further commodification of and political control over cultural production in Tory Britain recognises the increasing, often intolerable, material pressures that artists experience today. Conditions of poverty, exorbitant housing costs, precarious employment coupled with cuts in the size and duration of artistic grants clearly leave artists vulnerable to commodifying their autonomy or even serving the conservative interests of political or corporate donors. Yet, there is another story to tell: that of technological change that has allowed artists to disseminate their work and collaborate online in far more autonomous and potentially transformative ways. This is one part of the realm of contemporary 'immaterial' cultural labour and production that, though it remains at present all too easily commodified by those corporate giants of today's internet,

has also spawned practices of creative commoning, open-sourcing, and hacking that reveal the collaborative nature of knowledge and cultural production that perhaps comprise, as Marx ([1939] 1993: 1518) imagined, 'the material conditions to blow this foundation sky-high'.

Robert Hewison's (53) definition of cultural capitalism highlights this material struggle between capital and what Marx (1993: 1519) called our shared 'general intellect':

> 'Cultural capital is a form of wealth that is determined by its value in use, not its value in exchange. Its value increases in proportion to its abundance, not its scarcity. It is enjoyed by individuals, but it is a mutual creation that uses the resources of shared traditions and the collective imagination to generate a public, not a private, good. Cultural capitalism seeks to privatize this shared wealth, absorbing it into the circulation of commodities, and putting it to instrumental use.'

This crucial struggle has been greatly intensified by the development of the internet and exacerbated by capital's general inability to revive accumulation since the financial crisis of 2008. It is of particular significance to those of us like academics and artists directly involved in the production of knowledge and art.

Contextualising the current moment
Policing the permanent crisis

The recently proclaimed 'recovery' driven, once more, by money creation, asset inflation, and debt only superficially conceals the reality of a profound ongoing and intensifying economic, social, ecological, and political crisis. The crisis, now approaching its eighth year, feels permanent. Even the high priests of capital speak of a long-term 'secular stagnation' (Summers 2014). Long gone are the earlier utopian claims. We are now expected to learn and demonstrate 'resilience' in the face of the inevitable personal misfortunes and 'natural' financial crises and economic recessions ahead (Clarke 2015).

The increasingly widespread perceived failure of political leaders to resolve the crisis *in* the system has created a growing political space for more radical discourses identifying a crisis *of* the system itself and demanding or imagining radical alternatives (Jessop 2009). In short, the era of capital's neo-liberal hegemony seems, after three long decades, to be over. Unsurprisingly, intensifying physical and symbolic violence characterises the ruling class' response.

There are many fruitful concepts at our disposal to understand the current moment. Slavoj Žižek (1997) has developed Jacques Lacan's concept of the 'big Other' – a collective fiction symbolising the symbolic structure, an abstraction required in the necessary reduction of complexity when imagining any social field – whose continued ignorance of the wellusion of the system is vital for its continuing legitimacy. It could be said that, in our state of permanent crisis, the big Other sees through the wellusion. Put even more plainly, we now all see that the Emperor is naked.

We might alternatively frame the current moment with reference to Jacques Rancière's (2010: 112) conceptualisation of politics as 'the police of the sensible'. For Rancière, the police of the sensible is not primarily a social function but a symbolic constitution of the social that secures 'consensus' around a particular understanding and acceptance of the social order that is portrayed as universal, but actually silences and excludes (ibid: 112). Since the police involves establishing a consensus that renders those uncounted silent and invisible, the essence of politics is to create 'dissensus' that makes the uncounted, unseen, and unheard counted, seen and heard. From this perspective, we might describe the current moment as an intensely political moment in this Rancièreian sense.

Not in contradiction to these approaches, I understand this current moment as, in Gramscian terms, an 'organic crisis' of hegemonic politics defined by Laclau and Mouffe ([1985] 2014: 496) as 'a conjuncture where there is a generalized weakening of the relational system defining the identities of a given social or political space, and where, as a result there is a proliferation of floating elements' Consequently, following Laclau and Mouffe (2014: 198), rather than thinking in essentialist terms of a contemporary intensification of any binary war of position, we can recognise myriad '*democratic*

struggles where these imply a plurality of political spaces, and of *popular* struggles where certain discourses *tendentially* construct the division of a single political space in two opposed fields. But it is clear that the fundamental concept is that of 'democratic struggle', and that popular struggles are merely specific conjunctures resulting from the multiplication of equivalence effects among the democratic struggles.'

In sum, when surveying the political landscape today, though we can clearly identify important new political alliances and what Laclau and Mouffe (2014: 496) call 'nodal points' in this fluid situation, I believe it would be wrong to identify the emergence of any clear counter-hegemonic bloc. Instead, what characterises the landscape is a fluid plurality of struggles with their associated, sometimes separate, sometimes combined, strategies and practices of articulation. Capital's permanent crisis perpetuates the continuing fluidity and overdetermination of the political space.

The current psychosocial condition(s)

If we are to offer a useful theory of transformative art that can help inform the work of artists and social scientists, we need to have some understanding (or at least informed interpretation) of the psychosocial conditions prevalent among people in Britain today.

Here, what springs immediately to mind, of course, is the burgeoning growth in numbers of people suffering from mental wellness and the related absence of any broad recognition of the political-economic factors behind this terrible increase in suffering. The neo-liberal cult of the individual and consumerism, combined with the disciplinary technologies of 'resilience' (mentioned above) and 'responsibilization' omnipresent in every job centre, health centre, ministerial speech, and tabloid article, seem to have 'successfully' internalised the structural necessities and injustices and inequalities of capitalism and its crisis. They are manifested in our suffering: depression, anorexia, bulimia, bipolar disorder, addiction, self-harm, and suicide.

Reflexive impotence

Drawing on his own personal teaching experiences, Mark Fisher (2012: 21) describes at first hand the frightening regularity of diagnosed mental wellness, as well as learning difficulties and dyslexia, among his students: 'It is not an exaggeration to say that being a teenager in late capitalist Britain is now close to being reclassified as a sickness'. Pathologisation forecloses politicisation, not just from above but, most poignantly, from within.

> 'They know things are bad, but more than that, they know they can't do anything about it.
> But that 'knowledge', that reflexivity, is not a passive observation of an already existing
> state of affairs. It is a self-fulfilling prophecy' (ibid: 21)

Fisher identifies this 'reflexive impotence' as an 'unstated worldview amongst the British young' today (ibid: 21). For Fisher, this reflexive impotence is also expressive of a wider societal condition: a continued post-modern lack of faith in any bigger vision of the future, a lack of faith that has helped to sustain what he calls 'capitalist realism'.

Civic illiteracy

Just like Fisher (and following Foucault, Deleuze, and Guattari, of course), Henry Giroux has sought to emphasize the political economy of our mental illness. Giroux (2013) also describes what he calls a 'crisis of civic illiteracy'. Drawing directly from C Wright Mills' ([1959] 2000) concept of the 'sociological imagination', Giroux links the demise of democracy to our 'increasing inability...to connect the everyday problems that people face with larger social forces'. Giroux describes this condition as a 'civic illiteracy' that 'depoliticizes [our] own sense of agency and makes politics itself an empty gesture'. He lays the blame directly at the capitalist culture industry:

> 'Think of the forces at work in the larger culture that work overtime to situate us within a
> privatized world of fantasy, spectacle and resentment that is entirely removed from larger

social problems and public concerns. For instance, corporate culture, with its unrelenting commercials, carpet-bombs our audio and visual fields with the message that the only viable way to define ourselves is to shop and consume in an orgy of private pursuits. Popular culture traps us in the privatized universe of celebrity culture, urging us to define ourselves through the often empty and trivialized and highly individualized interests of celebrities. Pharmaceutical companies urge us to deal with our problems, largely produced by economic and political forces out of our control, by taking a drug, one that will both chill us out and increase their profit margins. (This has now become an educational measure applied increasingly and indiscriminately to children in our schools.) Pop psychologists urge us to simply think positively, give each other hugs and pull ourselves up by the bootstraps while also insisting that those who confront reality and its mix of complex social issues are, as Chris Hedges points out, defeatists, a negative force that inhibits "our inner essence and power."'

The 'empire of the self'
Bringing this opening section of the paper full circle, I recognise the part that television and the wider media has played in cultivating what the filmmaker Adam Curtis has called 'the empire of the self'. The function of television is not to tell us what to think so much as it is to tell us what to *feel*. 'In the 'empire of the self' everyone 'feels the same' without ever escaping a condition of solipsism (Curtis in Fisher 2012: 74). Echoing Giroux, Curtis diagnoses people as 'being trapped within themselves – in a world of individualism everyone is trapped within their own feelings, trapped within their own imaginations'.
Though only anecdotal, it is worth noting that, in recent years, the Edinburgh Festival, the world's largest arts festival, has hosted a growing number of one-person shows in which individuals recount their personal experiences of mental illness. I recall here Adorno's (2001: 187) insight that:

> 'In so far as a film only recounts the fate of an individual, even if maintaining the most extreme critical awareness, it already succumbs to ideology. The case which is presented as one which is still worth recounting becomes for all its desperate nature an excuse for the world which has produced something so worthy of being related; while the real desperation expresses itself mutely in the fact there is nothing more to be recounted and that all I can do is recognize it for what it is.'

How can we cultivate educated hope and self-belief in such psychosocial conditions?
How deep and widespread the personal and social consequences of decades of atomisation, individualisation, and 'responsibilisation' are is hard to say (Shamir 2008). Yet, for those of us engaged in the production of knowledge and art committed to contributing to processes of social transformation, we must design our political interventions as conscious as possible of the psychosocial conditions in which we live and work. Our position on this issue determines the very strategy we pursue, so we must try to begin our endeavours by asking the right question.
With this in mind, I do not believe that we face a situation of non-thinking. Consequently the question 'How can we get people to think?' would, I believe, represent a flawed and probably paternalistic approach to the production of transformative art. Instead, I believe that we are confronted by a crisis of *self-belief*, personal and collective. This, I believe, explains the enduring power of the culture industry and the 'spectacle'. It was never Adorno's position that we completely and consistently believe what our televisions screens tell us; it was that we rarely if ever truly believe in what we are sold, but that we do not believe in ourselves enough to imagine any alternative.
The combination of a fluid, unstable, and dangerous organic crisis of capital, concentrated mass media power, and a widespread lack of civic literacy and self-belief is a frightening one. But they are conditions also of opportunity. For me, then, the primary question for those seeking to contribute to democratic change is how to cultivate what Ernst Bloch ([1959] 1986: 126) called 'educated hope' (*docta spes*) and to help people, as individuals and communities, believe in themselves as having the

intellectual and political power to change their world.

Towards a practical theory of transformative art

With our primary question now in hand, I begin my elaboration of a contemporary practical theory of transformative art. This in turn begins with a rejection of any simplistic cause and effect relationship between artistic intervention and social outcome. What may seem obvious – that there can be no direct cause and effect relationship between art and social change – requires a brief elaboration of some of the key reasons this is so, for it is out of this negation that I will begin to build my theory.

Rejecting cause and effect

'Trying to use the arts for social instruction…is like playing snooker with a piece of string'
                                        (François Matarasso in Robert Hewison 2014)

Though, he may not have fully considered its politico-aesthetic significance, Theodor Adorno (2001: 500) noted that the 'gap' between intentions and outcomes was 'inherent in the medium' of television and film. Reading Matarasso's quote above, one might consider that filling this gap constituted a technical problem – that artists have simply not yet found the right techniques, the right instruments to create the personal and social effects needed to move the passive spectators experiencing their art in the desired direction. Instead, the problem is political. The gap reflects the autonomy of both the spectator and the work of art itself as a 'third thing that is owned by no one, whose meaning is owned by no one, but which subsists between them, excluding any uniform transmission' (Rancière 2009: 42).

Moreover, as Jacques Rancière emphasises, thinking in this technical way reflects a fundamental anti-democratic 'inegalitarianism':

> 'The playwright or director would like the spectators to see this and feel that, understand some particular thing and draw some particular conclusion. This is the logic of the stultifying pedagogue, the logic of straight, uniform transmission: there is something – a form of knowledge, a capacity, an energy in a body or a mind – on one side, and it must pass to the other side. What the pupil must learn is what the schoolmaster must teach her. What the spectator must see is what the director makes her see. What she must feel is the energy he communicates to her' (Rancière 2009: 36).

For Rancière (2009: 36), this inegalitarian paternalism is reflected in binaries such as knowing/viewing, reality/appearance, activity/passivity that 'specifically define a distribution of the sensible, an a priori distribution of the positions and capacities and incapacities attached to these positions'. As such, 'they are embodied allegories of inequality' (ibid: 36).

What is also crucial at this stage is to argue, again following Rancière's assessment, that in our present psychosocial conditions, works of art that seek to reveal to the spectator the 'truth' of, say, the ecocidal or genocidal nature of globalised capitalism are more likely to provoke within us reactions of overwhelming disempowerment, wilful blindness, or profound misanthropy.

> 'For the image to produce its political effect, the spectator must already be convinced that what it shows is American imperialism, not the madness of human beings in general' (ibid: 210)

Moreover, like Rancière, I question the motivational power of guilt.

> 'She must also be convinced that she is herself guilty of sharing in the prosperity rooted

in imperialist exploitation of the world. And she must further feel guilty about being there and doing nothing; about viewing these images of pain and death, rather than struggling against the powers responsible for it. In short, she must already feel guilty about viewing the image that is to create the feeling of guilt' (ibid: 210)

Ultimately, such works can end up alienating the already alienated and preaching to the converted. This leads us back to our primary question concerning cultivating educated hope and self-belief in conditions of a widespread and profound sense of disempowerment - a sense engendered not just by the culture industry itself, but, ironically, by the very theories *of* the culture industry (and the spectacle) produced by scholars who clearly sought to defeat and overcome the phenomena they described. In short, how can we get beyond Adorno and Debord to produce work that can cultivate educated hope and self-belief?

Getting beyond the end of politics – dialectical dissensus
Adorno and Debord as 'the end of politics'
The argument here, to be clear, is that Debord's spectacle and, to a lesser extent, Adorno's culture industry, for all their invaluable insights, set for us a seemingly inescapable trap in which we are condemned to mental slavery, unable to transform our world. In the society of the culture industry and the spectacle, freedom seems foreclosed. For Adorno, this mental enslavement seems near total:

> 'In contrast to the Kantian, the categorical imperative of the culture industry no longer has anything in common with freedom. It proclaims: you shall conform, without instruction as to what; conform to that which exists anyway, and to that which everyone thinks anyway as a reflex of its power and omnipresence. The power of the culture industry's ideology is such that conformity has replaced consciousness' (Adorno 2001: 295).

Jacques Rancière (2009: 83) similarly describes the supposedly total power of the spectacle:

> 'This post-Marxist and post-Situationist wisdom is not content to furnish a phantasmagorical depiction of a humanity completely buried beneath the rubbish of its frenzied consumption. It also depicts the law of domination as a force seizing on anything that claims to challenge it. It makes any protest a spectacle and any spectacle a commodity. It makes it an expression of futility, but also a demonstration of culpability.'

For Rancière, far from 'revolving around verifiable facts', such analyses 'simply tell us: things are not what they seem to be' – a melancholic proposition that both avoids 'the risk of ever being refuted' and also 'feeds on its own impotence' (ibid: 93). Rancière also emphasises the 'paternal solicitude' of these analyses, palliatives for 'poor people whose fragile brains were incapable of mastering such multiplicity' (ibid: 119).
He sees the transgression of analyses like Debord's in their removal of the 'capacity to reinvent lives' inherent within emancipatory Marxism transformed merely into 'an inability to judge situations'. The conclusion for Rancière is thus stark: Just as much as the 'Fukuyama-Hegelian' line peddled by the right, this leftist 'Heideggerian-Situationalism' thesis 'amounts to asserting that the logical telos of capitalism entails the extinction of politics'.
Whether Rancière's interpretation of the Society of the Spectacle can be fully applied to the Culture Industry is ambiguous. There seem to be far more dialectical spaces between producers and consumers of culture remaining within Adorno's analysis. Suffice to say that both analyses distinctly fail to offer us the kind of educated hope and self-belief we need to reimagine and reinvent our selves and our society. And it is within these dialectical space that I will begin to shape an alternative theory of artistic practice.

Benjamin's dialectical promise

For Guy Debord, since the spectacle confronted us as a totalising force consuming and commodifying all efforts at resistance, emancipatory communication could only take place in the unmediated, direct forum of workers' councils. While rejecting the essentialist productivism of Debord's communism, I recognise the centrality of unmediated dialogue in counter-hegemonic communication and Debord's emphasis on a philosophy of praxis as the dynamic foundation of such encounters. However, it seems that Debord was unable to recognise the subversive, disruptive, and ultimately emancipatory potential inherent within the communication technologies that themselves constructed and maintain spectacular society. Here, I must bring Walter Benjamin in for it was Benjamin who most insightfully and most optimistically recognised this potential.

While Benjamin saw bourgeois control over the means of cultural production as vital for the objectification and naturalisation of the worldview (*Weltanschauung*) of the ruling class, he was far more hopeful than Debord in his analysis of the mass media, recognising it as a sphere of political contestation like any other social institution. Hence, in an overly optimistic analysis of the early Soviet press, Benjamin ([1934] 1998: 90) excitedly identified a 'vast melting-down process' breaking down 'conventional separations between genres, between writer and poet, between scholar and popularizer' and 'even the separation between author and reader'. Benjamin concludes that 'political commitment, however revolutionary it may seem, functions in a counter-revolutionary way so long as the writer experiences his solidarity with the proletariat only *in the mind* and not as a producer' (ibid: 90). Thus, the emancipatory potential of the means of communication lies in the 'technical innovation' that makes democratic, that is, collaborative forms of artistic and informational media possible (ibid: 95).

Benjamin was perhaps overly optimistic regarding the interactive and collaborative potential of, first, the newspaper and, later, radio. Yet, substituting the word 'newspaper' for the word 'internet' in the following quote evokes a sense of a communication technology that can finally sustain Benjamin's vision.

> 'Authority to write is no longer founded in a specialist training but in a polytechnical one, and so becomes common property. In a word, the literarization of living conditions becomes a way of surmounting otherwise insoluble antinomies, and the place where the word is most debased – that is to say, the newspaper – becomes the very place where a rescue operation can be mounted' (ibid: 95).

In the internet I believe that Benjamin's hopeful vision can finds its fulfilment. Yet, as I well know, though it has had its moments, the internet is far from fulfilling its emancipatory potential and has been used most effectively as a tool of spectacular authoritarianism. What is needed is a more conscious strategy for utilising the internet within transformative artistic practices. This will be explored later. For now, what is crucial to state is that, in emphasising the emancipatory potential in breaking down traditional boundaries between producers and consumers of art, Benjamin's work begins to re-open the political, to revive the emancipatory-collaborative possibilities for art, critical theory, and democracy.

The emancipated spectator

Jacques Rancière takes Benjamin's dialectical radicalism further by not just exploring the technological possibilities for democratising cultural production, but by fundamentally rejecting the passivity of the spectator within even the more traditional binaries of cultural production and consumption. This, for Rancière, is an essential step in transcending the disempowering paternalism of orthodox aesthetic analyses and practices.

> 'Emancipation begins when I challenge the opposition between viewing and acting; when I understand that the self-evident facts that structure the relations between saying, seeing, and doing themselves belong to the structure of subjection and domination. It begins when

I understand viewing as an action' (Rancière 2009: 37).

Central here is Rancière's own blurring of the line between art and life. As spectators, we actively make sense of what we experience in just the same ways as we do in our daily lives:

> 'It is in this power of associating and dissociating that the emancipation of the spectator consists – that is to say, the emancipation of each of us as spectator. Being a spectator is not some passive condition that I should transform into activity. It is our normal situation...Every spectator is already an actor in her story; every actor, every man of action, is the spectator of the same story' (ibid: 48).

Echoing Benjamin, Rancière defines the word 'emancipation' itself as 'the blurring of the boundary between those who act and those who look; between individuals and members of a collective body' (ibid: 54). What this means can sound self-evident, but must be repeated: any democratic theory of artistic practice must recognise the active intellectuality and emancipatory potential of the spectator. This recognition is given full voice in Rancière's concept of 'equality of intelligences'.

Equality of intelligences
I understand Rancière to mean several things by his term 'equality of intelligences'. First, we are not speaking of a crude egalitarianism that sees no difference in intellectual capacities. Instead, it emphasises a *pedagogical* universalism: 'I learn everything the same way - translate signs into other signs and proceed by comparisons and illustrations in order to communicate and understand' (ibid: 45). Yet, it is from this foundational ethic, that the equality of intelligences can be deployed to mean much more.
For Rancière, rather than constituting any principle or goal, the equality of intelligence is an aesthetic-political *practice* that can effectively disrupt the social order. It can do so precisely because 'the inegalitarian order itself always already presupposes the equality of individuals as speaking beings in its functioning' (Corcoran in Rancière 2010: 38). It is the very fact that our hegemonic ideology both itself claims this equality but 'simultaneously disavows it' that gives artistic practices imbued with Rancière's 'presupposition' of equality of intelligences its disruptive political power.

Dialectical dissensus: politics as hacking
If what we commonly understand as politics is, in fact, what Rancière calls '*con*sensus' then a disruption of the social order it is founded on is what Rancière (2010) calls '*dis*sensus'. For Rancière (2010: 118). dissensus constitutes the real 'essence of politics':

> 'The essence of politics is dissensus. Dissensus is not a confrontation between interests or opinions. It is the demonstration (manifestation) of a gap in the sensible itself' (ibid: 118).

Central to any political moment, to any instance of dissensus, is a 'particular kind of speech situation', often short-lived, in which 'those who are excluded from the political order or included in it in a subordinate way, stand up and speak for themselves' (Corcoran in Rancière 2010: 28). Rancière describes this speech situation as 'litigious' because it 'disputes as baseless the extension of the predicates that defines the politicity of some and relegates others to the obscurity of the merely given' and 'refutes the forms of identification and belonging that work to maintain the status quo'. The dissensual speech act, 'through a violently poetic displacement of the prevailing relations of speech, introduces a supplementary speech that is irreducible to the constraints of social place'. Hence, for Rancière, the 'essential work' of dissensus as politics involves 'the configuration of its own space' in order to 'make the world of its subjects and its operations seen' (ibid: 114). 'The essence of politics is the manifestation of dissensus as the presence of two worlds in one.' The presupposition of equality of intelligences underpins dissensual artistic-political practice.
For too long, the 'critique of the spectacle' has remained the 'alpha and omega of the 'politics of art''

(Rancière 2009: 155). Rancière shows us a way out:

> 'To escape the circle is to start from different presuppositions, assumptions that are certainly unreasonable from the perspective of our oligarchic societies and the so-called critical logic that is its double. Thus, it would be assumed that the incapable are capable; that there is no hidden secret of the machine that keeps them trapped in their place. It would be assumed that there is no fatal mechanism transforming reality into image; no monstrous beast absorbing all desires and energies into its belly; no lost community to be restored. What there is are simply scenes of dissensus, capable of surfacing in any place and at any time' (ibid: 150).

The constant and ubiquitous possibility for dissensus means that:

> 'there is neither a reality concealed behind appearances nor a single regime of presentation and interpretation of the given imposing its obviousness on all. It means that every situation can be cracked open from the inside, reconfigured in a different regime of perception and signification. To reconfigure the landscape of what can be seen and what can be thought is to alter the field of the possible and the distribution of capacities and incapacities. Dissensus brings back into play both the obviousness of what can be perceived, thought and done, and the distribution of those who are capable of perceiving, thinking and altering the coordinates of the shared world' (ibid: 150).

Rancière (2009: 112) spells out the fundamental significance of dissensus for artists and social scientists aiming for social change:

> 'This is what a process of political subjectivation consists in: in the action of uncounted capacities that crack open the unity of the given and the obviousness of the visible, in order to sketch a new topography of the possible. Collective understanding of emancipation is not the comprehension of a total process of subjection. It is the collectivization of capacities invested in scenes of dissensus. It is the employment of the capacity of anyone whatsoever, of the quality of human beings without qualities. As I have said, these are unreasonable hypotheses. Yet I believe that today there is more to be sought and found in the investigation of this power than in the endless task of unmasking fetishes or the endless demonstration of the omnipotence of the beast.'

Rancière's concept and theory of dissensus as practice and process brings to mind the practice and principles of hacking. Here, I am not referring to the pejorative use of the word to describe an individual who gains illegal access to protected computer systems, but to the subculture of hacking. Within this culture, a hacker is widely understood as 'a person who delights in having an intimate understanding of the internal workings of a system, computers and computer networks in particular'. A hacker is 'a person who enjoys exploring the details of programmable systems and how to stretch their capabilities, as opposed to most users, who prefer to learn only the minimum necessary'. A hacker is someone who 'enjoys the intellectual challenge of creatively overcoming or circumventing limitations'.[4] What hacking fundamentally entails, then, is the deconstruction of a particular construction or configuration of a technological device or practice in order to fully understand its logic and function so that it can then be reconstructed or reconfigured in order to be used for additional or alternative functions. It is this understanding that leads me to think of dissensual artistic practices as a political hacking.

The Wire as political hack

---

[4]See here...http://catb.org/jargon/html/H/hacker.html

An example can illustrate my thinking here. Here is David Simon (in Alvarez 2004: 706) talking about his creation 'The Wire':

> 'There are rules to this "game" of the TV crime drama, and The Wire flouts all of them, bringing us into a world where those charged to serve and protect are often more concerned with career advancement and bureaucratic number-crunching than with any conventional notion of justice. Our ragtag band of hero cops are flawed far beyond the threshold of easy sympathy. The bad-guy criminals they haphazardly pursue are portrayed as being so deeply, at times poignantly, circumscribed by the mean streets to which they themselves contribute meanness that easy hatred of them is likewise difficult. The Wire is playing its own game.'

'The Wire' is described by Simon in ways comparable to hacking. Now, here is The Wire as overtly *political* hack, as dissensus:

> 'There are two ways of traveling. One is with a tour guide, who takes you to the crap everyone sees. You take a snapshot and move on, experiencing nothing beyond a crude visual and the retention of a few facts. The other way to travel requires more time – hence the need for this kind of viewing to be a long-form series or miniseries, in this bad metaphor – but if you stay in one place, say, if you put up your bag and go down to the local pub or shebeen and you play the fool a bit and make some friends and open yourself up to a new place and new time and new people, soon you have a sense of another world entirely. I're after this: making television into that kind of travel, intellectually. Bringing those pieces of America that are obscured or ignored or otherwise segregated from the ordinary and effectively arguing their relevance and existence to ordinary Americans. Saying, in effect, this is part of the country you have made. This too is who we are and what we have built. Think again, motherfuckers' (Simon in Alvarez 2010: 1409).

Dissensual practice as hacking is also dialectical practice: we transcend the mere negation of the spectacle and create the possibility of the new from within the repression of the foreclosed consensus. In this example, Simon reimagines and attempts to recreate television from within.

Mark Fisher (2012: 15-16) is right to argue that 'any number of radical theorists from Brecht through to Foucault and Badiou have maintained [that] emancipatory politics must always destroy the appearance of a 'natural order', must reveal what is presented as necessary and inevitable to be a mere contingency, just as it must make what was previously deemed to be impossible seem attainable'. However, several factors combine to distinguish Rancière's theory of dissensus, in my view. First, his fusion of politics and aesthetics offers us a practical way of transcending the spectacle and reopening the political. Second, the pedagogical foundations of his dissensus theory of aesthetics allow us to reopen the political in truly radically democratic ways. The emancipated spectator transcends the paternalism that largely circumscribed democratic possibilities in earlier theories of transformative art. Rancière's fusion of aesthetics and politics revives our individual and collective intellectual and emancipatory potential.

Rancière's dissensus is a philosophy of praxis, but dissensual practice still seems insufficient for cultivating self-belief and educated hope? This, I believe, requires combining dissensual artistic practice with more direct pedagogical interventions. I will propose a strategy for such interventions within the following ideas and principles for transformative artistic practice.

What is to be done? Ideas and principles for transformative artistic practice

> *'Rancière's work on politics and aesthetics continues to stimulate debate. It offers us some of the most productive solutions to questions of political subjectivation and aesthetic*

experience, as well as insightful analyses of the conjuncture. Ultimately, However, his concepts are not merely presented as fodder for academic debate; the challenge that they throw out to us, and the test of their pertinence, is one of their usefulness.'

(Corcoran in Rancière 2010: 84)

How should we as artists and social scientists respond to the 'challenge' that Rancière throws out to us? Here, as I see them, are the main ideas and principles for a radically democratic practice of transformative art.

Overcoming the 'normal regime of the sensible'
If the essence of politics is a disruption of the police then aesthetic-political practice becomes even more important in the current conditions of the increasingly authoritarian policing of the permanent crisis. Active social consensus for the social order has largely long been withdrawn. Passive consent is increasingly fragile. Consequently, the policing of the sensible is becoming more direct, less subtle, more violent and, thus, more vulnerable. Possibilities for dissensus grow exponentially. Ours is an intensely political moment.

However, artistic practice of dissensus must come with a pedagogical understanding of personal and collective change. Dissensus creates a disturbance, a disruption not just in what we see and what we believe but in our very subjectivities and identities. This is the antithesis of the 'feeling [of being] on safe ground' and the 'infantile need for protection' that the culture industry produces (Adorno 2001: 446). Dissensus also reintroduces the personal and social conflict that the culture industry's production of reality sweeps away or 'constructs and smoothly resolves' (ibid: 453). Theodor Adorno shared Rancière's insistence on 'concentrat[ing] on issues of which we are vaguely but uncomfortably aware, even at the expense of our discomfort's mounting, the further and the more systematically our studies proceed' (ibid: 486).

The goal of transformative art is the production of what Rancière (2010: 56) calls a new specific 'aesthetic regime' that 'overthrows this normativity and the relationship between form and matter on which it is based'. This attempt to overcome the 'normal regime of the sensible' requires provoking an initial sensation of disorientation that will invariably be responded to by many with feelings of denial and anger. How we as artists and social scientists can strategically respond to this is an important question to explore. I propose one strategy later in this section, but I suggest that a general empathetic awareness of this initial negative reaction to disruptive artistic practice will enable us to produce work that avoids counterproductive consequences.

Giving voice

'We're building something here ... and all the pieces matter.'

(Detective Lester Freamon, 'The Wire')

Of course, fundamental to dissensual artistic practice is the creation of space that gives voice: that makes the unseen seen, the unheard heard, the uncounted counted.

For David Simon and his co-creaters of 'The Wire', 'a priority was to humanize the underclass' (Simon in Alvarez 2004: 179). Co-writer George Pellicanos (in Alvarez 2004: 821) describes his work in similar terms:

> 'I make my living writing about people who, because of an accident of birth and circumstance, are less fortunate than me. In interviews I often say that my mission is to welluminate and dignify their lives to a public that rarely reads about them or recognizes their humanity in film, television, and fiction.'

Simon and his team's commitment to depicting the true social reality of Baltimore to the very best of their ability, experience, and understanding underpin their exceptional achievement. However,

ultimately, their script is a fictional depiction written by a handful of (more privileged, older, whiter, male) individuals. This fact might underpin its political limitations – a fact that Pellicanos (in Alvarez 2004: 536) is clearly conscious of:

> 'What goes unsaid is the gnawing feeling that I am also exploiting them for my personal gain. It is the same feeling I sometimes get while working on The Wire, which takes our shoot to some of the most impoverished sections of Baltimore. On set I often meet kids who greet us as if the circus has come to town. Many of us indulge them by bringing them into the video vwellage, letting them watch the monitors, Iar the headphones, and eat candy and junk food from the craft service tables. This makes them happy for a little while and, undeniably, allows us to feel good about ourselves. But at the end of the day I go back to our lives and they go back to theirs. For them, nothing has changed.'

It is this recognition that leads Pellicanos to refute any claims that he was doing any kind of public service (ibid: 536).

The Wire was a seminal moment in television history. Its creators produced an epic that disrupted and transcended (hacked) the consensual established truths of television and that shone a glaring, harsh light on the American nightmare. It was written and produced by local Baltimore people and featured real-life police and drug gang members as actors. Yet, to what extent did the voice that its creators gave the autonomous voice of the unheard? David Simon (in Alvarez 2004: 1399)describes a strategy of 'verisimilitude' that informed the creation of The Wire:

> 'My standard for verisimilitude is simple and I came to it when I started to write prose narrative: fuck the average reader. I was always told to write for the average reader in my newspaper life. The average reader, as they meant it, was some suburban white subscriber with two-point-whatever kids and three-point-whatever cars and a dog and a cat and lawn furniture. He knows nothing and he needs everything explained to him right away, so that exposition becomes this incredible, story-telling burden. Fuck him. Fuck him to hell.'

David Simon's commitment to this principle and practice of 'verisimilitude' is characteristically fierce. For Simon, verisimilitude means producing a work that even those immersed in the events it portrays would recognise its authenticity.

> 'Make no mistake...this doesn't mean I want the subjects to agree with every page. Sometimes the adversarial nature of what I am saying requires that I write what the subjects will not like, in terms of content. But in terms of dialogue, vernacular, description, tone – I want a homicide detective, or a drug slinger, or a longshoreman, or a politician anywhere in America to sit up and say, Whoa, that's how my day is. That's my goal' (ibid: 910).

Simon confesses that his drive for verisimilitude 'derives not from pride or ambition or any writerly vanity, but from fear. Absolute fear':

> 'Like many writers, I live every day with the vague nightmare that at some point, someone more knowledgeable than myself is going to sit up and pen a massive screed indicating exactly where my work is shallow and fraudulent and rooted in lame, half-assed assumptions. I see myself labeled a writer, and I get good reviews, and I have the same doubts buried, latent, even after my successes. I suspect many, many writers feel this way. I think it is rooted in the absolute arrogance that comes with standing up at the community campfwere and declaring, essentially, that I have the best story that ought to be told next and that people should fucking listen. Storytelling and storytellers are rooted in pay-attention-to-me onanism' (ibid: 910).

This is an honest admission, but I am not sure this is the whole story. Simon also speaks of love. The verisimilitude he chases depends on a 'prerequisite for capturing dialogue', for an intense and prolonged listening. For Simon, this means that 'on some level, you have to love people' (ibid: 1412). I am reminded here of Paolo Freire's philosophy of democratic pedagogy here. Freire's emphasis was also on dialogue and on listening as the only foundation and force for transformative learning. For Freire, this dialogue was made up of four components. It had to start with love: 'Dialogue cannot exist…in the absence of a profound love for the world and for people. The naming of the world, which is an act of creation and re-creation, is not possible if it is not infused with love.' Second, it had to be founded on faith: 'Dialogue further requires an intense faith in humankind, faith in their power to make and remake, to create and re-create, faith in their vocation to be more fully human (which is not the privilege of an elite, but the birthright of all). Faith in people is an a priori requirement for dialogue; the "dialogical man" believes in others even before he meets them face to face'. Third, dialogue cannot exist without hope, and, fourth, 'true dialogue cannot exist unless the dialoguers engage in critical thinking'.

From a radical democratic perspective, then, verisimilitude as conceptualised and practiced by David Simon and his colleagues achieves a great deal. It disrupts the culture industry and the 'prevailing ideology of our time' that it propounds and that naturalises our social order and our sensibility of that social order. It also diligently and passionately seeks to capture and reproduce the authentic voice of the 'underclass'. Theodor Adorno (2001: 318) wrote that 'culture is the perennial claim of the particular over the general, as long as the latter remains unreconciled to the former'. The Wire's political achievement lies directly in both demonstrating the humanity of the particular *and* revealing the inhumanity of the general. However, the limits of its achievements are linked to the democratic limitations of its production.

First, capturing voice with verisimilitude is not the same as giving voice. Second, the five series-long epic offers little in the way of hope. It closes with what Slavoj Zizek has called a 'Circle of Life' moment.5 This is a reference to Disney's 'Lion King' film in which each species of animal is shown to have its rightful place in the natural hierarchy of order. Zizek makes a persuasive case for The Wire ultimately delivering a message of consensus that closes the political once more.

Our task, therefore, is to imagine and pursue an artistic practice that builds on the achievements of works of artistic production that reach mass audiences like The Wire, but takes us in far more radical democratic directions. For me, this means several things: First, a radicalisation of process of (co-)production of art and culture; second, a more conscious pedagogical approach that gives primacy to the use and promotion of social theory; and, third, a more conscious attempt to cultivate self-belief and educated hope.

Process and prefiguration
Giving voice is absolutely vital to creating dissensual art, but this must be done alongside and through a radically democratised *process* of *co*-production. Recall Benjamin's insistence that 'the political commitment, however revolutionary it may seem, functions in a counter-revolutionary way so long as the writer experiences his solidarity with the proletariat only *in the mind* and not as a producer'. From this perspective I would deign to critique the creators of The Wire. But, what Benjamin offers Simon, Pellicanos, et al here is a way out – a way out from feelings of 'absolute fear' or those 'gnawing feelings' of exploiting others for personal gain.

Being without voice means being (or feeling) without power. A radical democratic process of co-production engages all participants in a creative process of production that helps all to develop their skills, knowledge, voice, power, humanity. There is no exploitation in such a process. There is emancipation; there is what Paolo Freire called 'humanisation'. This is not to deny the technical and political need for executive decision-making in creative processes. The director of a film may well still need to cut the final edit. Yet, this need not be an authoritarian or contentious issue if the process

---

5See Zizek on *The Wire* at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fsf4rAGlR5s.

of production has been firmly grounded in and shaped by an open, transparent, and egalitarian dialogue.

Nor does a radical democratic theory for transformative art always demand *co*-production. The artist may, of course, work alone. Even here, however, there should be a recognition of the collective general intellect, of the cultural influences, human labour and natural resources that were needed for us as individuals to create our art.

Hence, it is a focus on the very *process* of production itself that defines a radical democratic practice of transformative art, for a commitment to transformation of society begins with a commitment to transform oneself. Transformation begins with prefiguration.

The need for social theory

In his work 'On Television', Pierre Bourdieu (1998: 22) emphasises that 'at stake today in local as well as global political struggles is the capacity to impose a way of seeing the world, of making people wear "glasses" that force them to see the world divided up in certain ways (the young and the old, foreigners and the French …)'. This is helpful way to think about our dissensual artistic practice in ways that ensure we avoid paternalistic thinking and practice. We might regularly ask ourselves: 'Am I seeking to get people to see what I see or am I trying to help people to see for themselves?' Bourdieu himself documents the shift from the openly 'cultural' television of its earlier decades to a contemporary banality. However, he also rejects the 'paternalistic-pedagogical' television of the past which he sees as equally anti-democratic as today's 'populist spontaneism' and 'demagogic capitulation to popular tastes'.

Another important way of exploring Bourdieu's use of the 'glasses' metaphor is to recall the etymology of the word 'theory'. The Greek word 'theoria' means 'to see' or 'to behold'. Perhaps *the* most pressing, and difficult, challenge for artists and social scientists in conditions of civic illiteracy is that of helping people to begin to understand their own lives within the context of society and history: to develop their 'sociological imaginations' (Wright Mills 2000). Alternatively put, it is our challenge to help all people to become intellectuals. Antonio Gramsci's ([1971] 2005: 140) famous declaration that 'All [human beings] are intellectuals' constitutes the very foundation of radical democracy. This gives, I believe, social theory an indispensable function in transformative artistic practice. In keeping with a dialectical philosophy of praxis, I am not just talking about the use of social theory, but the production of social theory by all in collaborative and political processes of the production of art, knowledge, and social change.

One central difficulty (among many) that this challenge raises is that developing our intellectuality, our sociological imaginations, entails the development of a recognition and understanding of the social structures that shape our lives and constrain our freedom. This, in turn, requires a development of the recognition of how the social relations that connect us are rendered invisible. From an artistic perspective, this presents problems in terms of the depiction of other times and spaces. One remarkable achievement of The Wire is that, due to its own lengthy duration over several years and its depiction of various times and spaces, it makes visible power structures that directly link the richest to the poorest, people who invariably never actually know or even see each other. Yet, could a more explicit use of social theory help people to develop their intellectuality more consciously? And how could this technically be achieved in harmony with dissensual artistic practice?

The website as Benjaminian emancipatory-collaborative technology

I believe that the emergence of the internet in general and the website in particular represents a technological development significant enough upon which to found and render practicable a new theory of and for transformative art. The process begins with the production of dissensus that creates a compelling emotional response in spectators. But, to leave it here would be insufficient for two main reasons. First, dissensus can create feelings of disorientation that might lead to negative feelings, particularly in conditions of reflexive impotence and civic illiteracy. Therefore, if artists and social scientists want to help spectators to transcend the 'normal regime of the sensible', we need to offer support and encouragement to spectators when they experience these initial feelings. One vital way

of doing this would surely be, in the spirit of Freire and Debord, to facilitate and encourage online *and real life* dialogue – safe spaces for people to share their thoughts, feelings, and ideas. Second, the opening that dissensual art can stimulate offers us a real opportunity to invite spectators to use social theory to reflect on and analyse the issues raised by the art work and their and wider community/social responses to it. It is the website that can now so effectively enable artists and social scientists to design pedagogical interventions that invite spectators to use social theory and social science to independently interpret not just works of art, but, of course, their lives and the world in general. In short, we can use websites to help people develop their civic literacy, *but most potently only after a dissensual artistic encounter.*

What is absolutely crucial, of course, is that the website is not used to tell spectators *what* to think, but to give them the conceptual and theoretical tools to analyse and think for themselves. In this way, the website can form the pedagogical bridge linking the sensation to transformation. What form this website would take in order to encourage and support processes of individual and collective praxis is not yet clear. What is clear is that we need a conscious strategy for designing the website with this goal in mind.

> 'If indeed the advances of technology largely determine the fate of society, then the technicized forms of modern consciousness are also heralds of that fate. They transform culture into a total lie, but this untruth confesses the truth about the socio-economic base with which it has now become identical. The neon signs which hang over our cities and outshine the natural light of the night with their own are comets presaging the natural disaster of society, its frozen death. Yet they do not come from the sky. They are controlled from earth. It depends upon human beings themselves whether they will extinguish these lights and awake from a nightmare which only threatens to become actual as long as men believe in it' (Adorno 2001: 272).

Adorno reminds us of our agency in poetic fashion. More prosaically, he observes how 'the culture industry finds ideological support precisely in so far as it carefully shields itself from the full potential of the techniques contained in its products' (ibid: 286).

If Adam Curtis is right in arguing that the internet 'facilitates communities of solipsists, interpassive networks of like-minds who confirm, rather than challenge, each others' assumptions and prejudices' (Curtis in Fisher 2012: 74) then it is surely because the internet, like any pervasive social institution, will largely reproduce and reinforce hegemonic forms of communication and relations. Mark Fisher agrees that 'the interpassive simulation of participation in postmodern media, the network narcissism of MySpace and Facebook, has, in the main, generated content that is repetitive, parasitic and conformist'. However, he equally contends that:

> 'contrary to Curtis's account of blogging, blogs can generate new discourse networks that have no correlate in the social field outside cyberspace. As Old Media increasingly becomes subsumed into PR and the consumer report replaces the critical essay, some zones of cyberspace offer resistance to a 'critical compression' that is elsewhere depressingly pervasive' (ibid: 74).

The internet is the communication technology finally pregnant with the emancipatory potential that Walter Benjamin yearned for. It can facilitate the breakdown of the traditional boundaries between producers and consumers of culture and communication he identified as necessary for democratic and democratising cultural practices. Furthermore, it is surely already catalysing the emancipation of our general intellect. Artists and social scientists can hasten this process by developing democratic, participatory ways for spectators of their works to engage in both these practices. We can use websites to invite spectators to use and develop social theory and co-produce art and knowledge. We can use websites to facilitate and encourage online and real life dialogue that can help people overcome those initial and recurring feelings of disorientation, anger, confusion, uncertainty that accompany transformative experiences. The internet can and has reinforced the empire of the self, reflexive

impotence, and civic illiteracy. As artists and social scientists, we can and should develop conscious strategies for using it to cultivate self-belief and educated hope.

Conclusion: Beyond archi-politics, towards democracy

In this paper, I have set out an embryonic contemporary, radical democratic, practical theory of and for transformative art. It is embryonic because it clearly needs further refinement and development by receiving the input of others, and through its practical application. It is contemporary because it is grounded in a cultural-political-economic analysis of current conditions – an analysis that informs its point of departure and ultimate objective: the cultivation of self-belief, educated hope, and mass intellectuality. It is radically democratic not just in the way it reimagines how artists and social scientists can help others to transform themselves and society, but because it emphasises the radical democratisation of the process of artistic production that begins with a prefigurative *self-*transformation. It is practical because it offers broad technical and ethical guidelines for artistic practice without prescribing specific forms or devices.

What this theory amounts to is an attempt to escape the prison of what Jacques Rancière terms 'archi-politics' – the 'occupation' of the city-state by a specific 'ethos' (way of living), 'nomos' (law and 'tone'), and logic (of commencement/commandment in which the rulers rule and the ruled are ruled). In Rancièreian terms, the theory seeks to express a 'metexis proper to politics' that embodies and expresses 'a break with all the logics that allocate parts according to the exercise of the arkhê' (Rancière 2010: 100). Thus, through the elaboration of this theory and its desired influence, I do not directly will the establishment of democracy as political regime. I will instead democracy as 'the very institution of politics itself – of its subject and of the form of its relationship', for it is only 'as a rupture with the logic of arkhê' that we the people, the demos, exist (ibid: 103).

It is with this design in mind and in the spirit of collaboration that I offer this paper and invite critique from artists, social scientists, and beyond. Whatever forms transformative artistic practices take, collaboration between and among artists and social scientists will be hugely important. I hope that this theory can help to inspire and inform such collaborations and that such collaborations can, in turn, help to inform and develop this theory.

References

Theodor Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected essays on mass culture*, London: Routledge, [1971] 2001.

Rafael Alvarez, *The Wire: Truth be Told,* Edinburgh: Canongate, 2004.

Walter Benjamin, 'Author as Producer', *Understanding Brecht* (Verso: London), [1934] 1998.

Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, *Volume I*, Cambridge: MIT Press, [1959] 1986.

Pierre Bourdieu, *On Television*, New York: New Press, 1998.

Chris Clarke, 'Learning to Fail: Resilience and the Empty Promise of Financial Literacy Education', *Consumption, Markets and Culture*, 18, 3, 2015.

Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, Bread & Circuses Publishing, [1967] 2014.

Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is there no alternative?*, London: Zero Books, 2012.

Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, London: Continuum, 1970.

Henry Giroux, 'The Spectacle of Illiteracy and the Crisis of Democracy', *truthout*, 9th December, 2013. See http://www.truth-out.org/opinion/item/20511-henry-giroux-the-spectacle-of-illiteracy-and-the-crisis-of-democracy.

Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, edited and translated by Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, London: Lawrence & Wishart [1971] 2005.

Robert Hewison, *Cultural Capital: The Rise and Fall of Creative Britain*, London: Verso, 2014.

Anne Hope and Sally Timmel, *Training for Transformation*, Book I, Rugby: Practical Action Publishing, 1999.

Bob Jessop, 'Cultural Political Economy and Critical Policy Studies', *Critical Policy Studies* 3, 3-4, 2009.

Ernesto Laclau & Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics,* London: Verso, [1985] 2014.

Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy,* London: Penguin, [1939] 1993.

Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, London: Verso, 2009.

Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, London: Bloomsbury, 2010.

Ronen Shamir, 'The age of responsibilization: on market-embedded morality', *Economy and Society* 37, 1, 2008.

Lawrence Summers, 'U.S. Economic Prospects: Secular Stagnation, Hysterisis, and the Zero Lower Bound', *Business Economics* 49, 2, 2014.
http://larrysummers.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/NABE-speech-Lawrence-H.-Summers1.pdf

C Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, [1959] 2000.

Slavoj Zizek, 'The Big Other Doesn't Exist', *Journal of European Psychoanalysis*, Spring-Fall, 1997. See http://www.lacan.com/zizekother.htm.