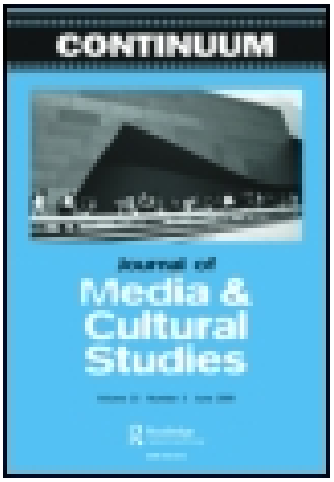
This article was downloaded by: [New York University]
On: 04 October 2014, At: 04:27
Publisher: Routledge
Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ccon20

In defence of popular TV: Carnivalesque V. left pessimism

John Docker [a]
[a] The New South Wales Institute of Technology , Sydney, NSW

Published online: 18 May 2009.

To cite this article: John Docker (1988) In defence of popular TV: Carnivalesque V. left pessimism, Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies, 1:2, 83-99

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10304318809359340

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the “Content”) contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions

John Docker

IN DEFENCE OF POPULAR TV:
Carnivalesque V. Left Pessimism

So far theories of the importance of carnival and inversion in cultural history, like those, most famously, of Mikhail Bakhtin in his *Rabelais and His World*, have been applied to early modern Europe. They have been used to refer to the ways in which festive practices, broadsheets, and theatre turned hierarchy and authority and power upside down in all sorts of relations, from class, gender and age to aesthetics and cosmology. But when it comes to the industrial and post-industrial world, a cultural theory forcewall still exists - as if popular culture since 1800, and in particular TV, has no significant continuities with pre-modern carnivalesque forms and philosophy. In this essay I relate Bakhtin's theory of carnivalesque to TV, to soap opera, game shows, and variety, in terms of: the critique of the hierarchy of genres; cosmologies concerning fate and time; the importance of festive abuse; parody and self-parody; the poetics of the grotesque; and games of luck and chance. Then I contrast this theory with those left pessimist' strands within post-modernism that focus on mass culture.

Bakhtin himself thought that the carnival spirit is indestructible in human society and that the tradition lives on after the Renaissance in the lower genres' of comedy, satire, fable, in the novel, and in burlesque and the popular stage.[1] Yet in the explosion of interest in the 1960s, 70s and 80s in Bakhtin, carnivalesque has been mainly applied to 'high' literature.[2] Bakhtin, with his theories of open and closed texts, the dialogic as against the monologic, and his prizing of heteroglossia and polyphony, of multiform voices and languages in and between texts conversing, arguing, contending, contradicting, parodying, mocking, questioning, contesting each other, has emerged in these writings as a kind of Russian version of Roland Barthes. He appears as a post-Revolution Russian who is anti-official and anti-authoritarian, now welcomed in the West as pioneering deconstructionist, a kind of New Critic with a fertile linguistic theory of the ever multiplying, ever conflicting, meanings of languages and texts. When Bakhtin's theory of carnivalesque has been applied to non-literary 'texts', as in a last-sentence reference in Julia Kristeva's 1966 essay "Word, Dialogue, and Novel", it is not to the popular culture of the mass media but to unnamed activities of "young people". Some British theorists, working from their strong 'culturalist' tradition of interest in sub-cultures, have tried to bring Bakhtin to Blackpool, to see if there are any carnivalesque residues in its modern amusement park holiday activities.[3]

Left Pessimism

But TV?! How can carnivalesque be related to an ordinary everyday medium that everyone says demands viewer passivity, that appears premised on lack of participation by spectators, and that is owned and controlled by huge corporations, so that TV culture is produced for masses, not by them? Who - apart from a 'rogue' figure like Walter Benjamin - could think of modern popular visual culture as in any sense carnivalesque when such a stance was so outside the dominant paradigms, the discursive formations, of the two most influential post-war approaches in mass culture and screen studies, the Frankfurt school and *Screen* theory?

The Frankfurt school approach was clearly established in Adorno and Horkheimer's essay on the Culture Industry in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), which consigns everything from jazz ("stylized barbarity"), hit songs, stars, magazines, Hollywood film and radio soap operas to the rubbish bin of cultural history. All belong to an "iron system" of capitalist production and reveal capitalism's "absolute power". As with the production of automobiles, such products are simply the result of standardisation and mass production. The different forms are really identical, and the differences you see are really just diverse ways of classifying, organising, and labelling consumers. Unlike with the telephone, there is no machinery of rejoinder. Consequently consumers are completely passive, as they react automatically to the various products of the entertainment industry. The producers of movies aim at realism, so that when consumers see a film they see the world outside as its extension: "Real life is becoming indistinguishable from the movies." The sound film in particular, leaving no room for imagination or spontaneity or sustained thought, "forces its victims to equate it directly with reality." And since that reality is capitalist, the effect is that the might of industrial society is lodged in their minds. There is a deep structure to the culture industry, the unfailing reproduction in people of obedience to social hierarchy, the disappearance of the individual in the dominant values of society. Further, the texts, in being mass-produced commodities, are too smooth and formulaic. True art, by contrast, especially avant-garde modernist art as in the Dadaists, Picasso, Schoenberg, the Expressionists, negates harmony and unity, indeed exposes its own failure to achieve such harmony and unity, and so always reveals the discrepancy between individual and society.

In this essay Adorno and Horkheimer can only view with dismay the coming of TV, feeling that as a synthesis of radio and film it will lead to a new stage in the culture industry's drastic impoverishment of aesthetic matter. Ten years later, during which time TV had rapidly become established as a mass popular form, Adorno expands, in his essay on "Television and the Patterns of Mass Culture", on this earlier vision of horror by turning for help to psychoanalysis. The procedure of the argument is similarly 'structuralist'. Beneath the surface diversity and 'fake' or 'pseudo-realism' of TV programs, there is an underlying deep structure, a single 'hidden message' that escapes the controls of viewers' consciousness. TV products appear polymorphous, and may even appear antitotalitarian, but they aim to produce in audiences the very smugness, intellectual passivity, and gullibility that fits in with totalitarian creeds. Why they succeed is a question for depth-psychology, but Adorno is happy with the thought that TV, in producing an "unreflecting obedience" to social hierarchy and authority, reflects in the mass of people an "infantile need for protection".[4]

British *Screen* theory of the 1970s and early 1980s, while it emerged from a very different intellectual tradition and theoretical language, the French structuralist, converged with the Frankfurt school in the general 'left-pessimism' it aimed at mass culture. In this theory all the different manifestations of Hollywood film and by extension TV, all the different genres, somehow reveal only a show of diversity. They really base themselves on the nineteenth-century English novel tradition of realism as typified by George Eliot's *Middlemarch.* The popular culture visual text is thereby the 'classic realist text' which tries to be a window onto reality, to pass itself off as reality itself. It does this by concealing its own workings, by not drawing attention to itself as art, as articulation, as text. Viewers, in identifying with the narrative, are inscribed in their unconscious in the dominant values of capitalist society, values which the text tells them constitute reality itself, rather than being discursive and ideological constructions.

The pleasures spectators enjoy in placing themselves under the spell of narratives are precisely those which ensure the reproduction of society's power. What we must do is destroy such pleasures, destroy narrative by being self-reflexive, by drawing attention to the text itself, thereby creating distance between spectator and society. In the words of Laura Mulvey, the first blow against popular film, already undertaken by radical filmmakers, is to "free the look of the camera into its materiality in time and space and the look of the audience into dialectics, passionate detachment", into a "distancing awareness". Such distance allows for another kind of pleasure, which we can now see is the intellectual's pleasure, rational contemplation.[5]

It would not be true to say that by the middle eighties 'left pessimism' - the mutual buttressing of the Frankfurt school and *Screen* studies orthodoxies - has been shattered, but its theoretical foundations are certainly constantly suffering from erosion from many directions. The assumption of viewer passivity and subjection, which has to be explained by recourse to psychoanalysis, has been undermined by ethnographic research on how actively audiences read popular visual texts. The cognate assumption, that the theorists themselves magically escape the subjection and unconsciousness of the rest of the dominated population by their capacity to retain a deconstructive rational distance, more and more worries by its remarkable elitism. The determinist social theory has suffered with the fall of functionalist Marxisms like that of the Althusserians. Cultural products, it is now more likely to be argued, are never totally determined by their conditions of production. They have their own relative autonomy as unpredictable, contradictory, ambiguous, and possibly resistant to dominant discourses. The reduction of all popular visual culture to an underlying deep structure has been challenged by the post-structuralist critique of structuralism, arguing that, in their signifying play, texts are too ambiguous, too multivalent, to yield single meanings and values. The contemptuous dismissal of popular culture and its replacement by a highly rationalist aesthetic has been questioned by the hospitality (at least in some versions) of post-modernism to the popular, in its mixing of 'high' and 'low' forms, and in its valorising of pleasure, of parody, self-parody, whimsy, pastiche.[6]

Melodrama

One of the first breaches in the wall of left pessimism was effected by Tania Modleski in her 1979 essay "The Search for Tomorrow in Today's Soap Operas", where she argues that the pleasure of such popular narratives should not be rejected but understood in terms of the lives of the women who are their audience. The soap opera, in its multiple, decentred narratives, everywhere breaks the illusion of unity and totality provided the spectator by realism. By constantly presenting her with the many-sidedness of any question, by never reaching a permanent conclusion, by breaking identification with a single controlling character and providing multiple points of contradictory, ever shifting identifications, the soap opera undermines the spectator's capacity to form unambiguous judgements. The daytime serial like *Days of Our Lives,* that is, may be in the vanguard not just of TV but of all popular narrative art because it is the very reverse of the classic realist text.[7]

Modleski's argument has been strongly supported by fellow American Robert C. Allen, who argues that the soaps offer complex fields of semiotic possibilities that their increasingly diverse audiences can use in a variety of ways. (Allen points to research showing how much daytime serials are watched by college students, male as well as female, whereas Modleski, in a reflectionist way, wants to derive their aesthetic features, like the constant interrupting of the narrative, directly from the presumed rhythms and psychology of women's daily lives at home). Their textuality and intertextuality demand enormous knowledge and competence of their readers/spectators, a cultural capital that high culture critics of soap operas usually abysmally lack. The soaps are open not closed texts, for not only do they constantly defeat narrative closure since their stories are never completed, but in their multiple viewpoints they also resist ideological closure.[8]

Modleski, quite properly, refers soap opera to the history of melodrama, not the nineteenth-century realist novel as in *Screen* theory. She argues, however, that it differs from traditional stage melodrama in refusing an ending and in the way the characters retain secrets, thus always complicating the narrative until it can never be resolved. The soap, the most popular form of drama in the world today, is indeed a dynamic development of stage melodrama and of serial fiction. From melodrama it draws on features that are at every point the reverse of realism. It takes a dramaturgy of excess and extravagance that is always highlighting its own theatricality, close to the point of parody. Its characters are not realist, are not well rounded and believable and explicable in an everyday psychological sense, but are more 'figures', like the masked figures of carnival, representing extremes and experiencing extreme states, often going through transformations and metamorphoses, and ever confronting each other in a way not permitted within the codes of everyday politeness. There is frequent camivalesque inversion, characters like JR in *Dallas* or Abby Ewing in *Knot's Landing* recalling how, in early nineteenth century melodrama, with its shaping context of the French Revolution and social radicalism, villain figures were frequently landowners, aristocrats, squires, factory owners. Indeed, Michael Booth has argued of melodrama in England that it was the chief social protest drama of the century, and certainly predated the industrial novel of the 1840s and 50s in its contemporary concerns, its interest in drink, homelessness, poverty, the poor laws, the game laws, naval discipline and press-gangs, slavery, attitudes to ex-convicts. It was interested in the two nations theme of rich and poor, and in the morality of the strike and industrial discontent, more often than not coming down on the side of man than master (he cites the remarkable 1832 play *The Factory Lad).* It was also fascinated by business life, commercial ambition in the City, and financial intrigue.[9]

Melodrama's cosmology, its view of fate and destiny as open, or at least as not finally tragic, is also camivalesque. Its chronotope, the way it organises its time and space, is as unlike everyday reality as possible, being always one of crisis or temporary quietness and retreat from crisis, and then crisis and cliffhanger again. Its rhythms, that is, are sensuous, erotic. There is enormous participation by audiences, in terms of popularity, public interest in soap opera stars, magazines catching readers up with stories as well as an informal culture of information-sharing about stories past and present, and pressure by the audience to retain characters that are threatened by the storylines with death or disappearance, or pressure to bring back 'dead' characters with either the return of the original actor or a replacement. Sometimes there is enormous public pressure on the storyliners not to break up love relationships. The mass media are in general nowhere near as inaccessible as the Frankfurt school and *Screen* theory orthodoxies are always suggesting: in the USA, for example, millions of visitors each year go to Los Angeles and make a tour through Universal Studios, seeing locations and how special effects are created and so on; people in the USA can also often see location shooting, Edward Woodward in *The Equalizer* filming in New York streets, Tom Selleck in *Magnum P.I.* being filmed in Hawaii. Is this concealing the materiality of the screen discourse?

At the same time soap opera is, as Modleski implies, clearly in the tradition of melodrama-influenced serial fiction, which began its spectacular career of popular success in the 1830s with *The Pickwick Papers.* Serial fiction is always calling attention to its own storytelling, its own delight and resourcefulness not in presenting reality but in *making* culture, inventing narratives, creating suspense and endless mysteries that beget not solutions but more suspense and new mysteries. And Modleski is right, the desire of characters to reveal all in melodrama, to reveal desire, dream, nightmare, trauma, fear, terror - melodrama as the release of the repressed - is in tension with the serial form of the narrative ever trying to maintain suspense and mystery and deflect resolution and knowledge by concealing and deferring. In this sense we might say that the soaps reveal heteroglossia, a space where the centripetal forces of melodrama (as revelation) and the centrifugal forces of serial narrative (fleeing from revelation into mystery) ever, deliciously and teasingly, collide.

Overall melodrama invites from its audiences complex responses, a capacity at once to be delighted by its excess and extremes and mystery, and to be involved in the intensity of the drama: to experience simultaneously pathos and comedy, sadnesss and humour, emotional involvement and ironic distance, and so to be in the receptive state that Peter Davidson has claimed for nineteenth-century music hall audiences: 'multiconsciousness'.[10]

Melodrama is also multi-genre, freely including and mixing comedy, romance, detective, adventure, mystery, horror, even, on occasion, the naturalistic and the tragic, and this brings us to another major breach in the wall of left pessimism. The theoretical strain of trying to collapse all the different film and TV genres into homogeneity, into a single phenomenon, the realist text, was too great, particularly as such genres were always calling attention to themselves not as reality but as *genres*, as part of the history not of realism but of fantasy. Further, the theory was based on the discrete fictional film: how could such a theory account not only for continuous narratives like melodrama, but for diverse forms like TV games and luck and quiz shows and the strong presence of variety? Surely *they* were not born out of *Middlemarctil* Surely an entirely different cultural history is involved here.

Game Shows

If we wish to come anywhere near understanding the enormous popularity and persistence of such games from early modern Europe to twentieth-century radio and TV I think we must boldly call on Bakhtin's evocation in *Rabelais and His World* of the philosophy and cosmology of carnival games of luck and chance in the marketplace, in sports and cards as well as in various forms of fortune-telling, wishing, and predictions. In their modern form such games are usually viewed with left pessimist dismay because of the large amount of internal advertising of prizes and holidays; therefore they must be constructing people as subjects of consumerism, the systematic production of false needs. Bakhtin, interestingly for a Marxist, was not at all averse to the marketplace as such as a setting for carnival, nor to the advertising that accompanied it, the cries and songs of the sellers.[11] His work here raises a question so far almost uniformly forbidden in left pessimist influenced media studies: is there anything intrinsically wrong with advertising?

The camivalesque genre of parodic prophecies and riddles, Bakhtin argues, is opposed to the genre of serious prophecies, which were of a gloomy and eschatological character, incorporating the medieval concept of history. Such games try to approach the world, time and the future, not as a sombre mystery play but as a satyrical drama. Prognostics and prophecies now concern not only the fate of kings, popes, and nobles, and the great events of the official world, but the life and destinies of the lower classes. In opposing the jocular and merry to the serious and gloomy, the eschatology of the Middle Ages is uncrowned, is turned into a 'gay monster'. Instead of seeing the future as fixed and unalterable, as sad and terrifying, time and destiny could appear carefree and open; the universe could be seen as not necessarily tragic.

In camivalesque, the images of games were seen as a condensed formula of life and of the historical process: fortune and misfortune, gain and loss, crowning of temporary victors, and uncrowning. Life was presented as a miniature play, a play without footlights. At the same time games drew the players out of the bounds of everyday life, liberated them from usual laws and regulations, and replaced established conventions by other, lighter conventionalities.[12]

The camivalesque cosmology of games helps, I think, explain their persistence into the modem era, and is at least part of the reason why game and quiz shows in radio like those (in Australia) of Jack Davey and Bob Dyer, or *Sale of the Century* and *The New Price is Right* and *Wheel of Fortune* on TV, have been so popular. We can also see such a cosmology as important in the popularity of *Perfect Match.* In this blind date show it is the serious conventions and expectations of romance that are replaced with lighter conventions, are transposed into a happy and light key. Romance as narrative always hangs on suspense, the possibility of a relationship succeeding if only various obstacles can be overcome, and much of the fun in the show involves the chief obstacle, that the contestants have never met before. Romance is associated with luck and chance, and so is given the chance of defeating fate as an inevitable failure. It mocks and uncrowns the notion of romance in high culture texts like Hardy's *Tess of the DVrbervilles* and Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea,* where romance is associated with tragedy, with sombre predestined failure, with victimology. Instead, romance and the future is associated with pleasure, clowning, openness, possibility, even the fun of shared distaster.

In drawing its players out of the bounds of everyday life, liberating them from usual laws and regulations, *Perfect Match* also acts as a theatre, a satirical drama, a grotesque and embarrassing exposure of gender attitudes. Here we must needs call on Bakhtin's observation in *The Dialogic Imagination* that the criminal trial has played a huge part in cultural history, because in 'crime' private passions and actions erupt into public notice, debate, contestation, and argument - hence its importance in Hollywood cinema, in TV, in journalism.[13]

The central segment of *Perfect Match* involves contestants who have returned from their trip to some exotic locale. They are interviewed separately, and then together see, along with us the viewers, what they say about each other - the simultaneous provision of multiple viewpoints. Sometimes they report they like each other, indeed there have been engagements, marriages, and babies. Just as frequently, however, sparks fly. The men tend to comment on the physical appearance of the women, they're too big and so on. The women often complain that the men are egotistical and patronising, that they think they're God's gift, and how chauvinist they are. One contestant was astonished by the way her date would refer to girlfriends he claimed to have as "squeezes" and to women's legs as "wheels": "And he was always checking the girls, everywhere he went, and making comments about what they looked like."[14] Another resented the way her date implied from the beginning of their holiday in Singapore (he insisted on catching a separate taxi from the airport) that he considered her too old for his tastes, because, she thought, he wanted a younger woman whom he could control. Another said the man kept implying he was too intelligent for her, an implication that was clearly untrue from the evidence of the interview. Interestingly, both these latter men were booed by the studio audience (and by my TV study class at the NSW Institute of Technology when we watched these segments on video).

The women particularly resent being judged by outward physical appearance, as subjects of the male gaze, and in this segment *she* is given the opportunity to be - in the words of Natalie Davis' essay on "Women on Top", on carnivalesque gender inversion in early modern Europe - "unruly" and "disorderly", to overturn, give her opinion on, return that gaze.[15]

Perfect Match, then, reveals society to itself. It is a theatre of social attitudes, providing space for the drama of gender. It is a criminal drama in comic key, a revealer of private attitudes for public awareness, a charivari not of policing of attitudes but of difference, of contestation, of unpredictable confrontations. It is, therefore, highly participatory for the audience at home, as well as for the contestants and their groups of friends in the studio audience. Smash goes the left pessimist myth of the passive audience yet again.

TV Variety

We have come to our final testing ground for left pessimist theses. By glancing at *Hey Hey It's Saturday* we can turn over a proposition that is looking more and more fantastic, that popular culture texts lack self-reflexivity. Again, TV variety like *Hey Hey* emerges not from *Middlemarch* but from Australia's robust history of music hall, vaudeville and revue, on the stage and in radio. Vaudeville featured singers, dancers, comedians, acrobats, magicians, ventriloquists, male and female impersonators, and animal acts (I can't remember such things featuring in George Eliot's novel). In revue a thin story-line was used to connect a series of comedy-sequences, backed by song and dance numbers, with an orchestra, ballet and show girls, and a comedienne, though the comedian was always the star of the show. From such traditions great comedians emerged like George Wallace and the legendary 'Mo' (Roy Rene), and often their counterparts on TV have been compere figures like Graham Kennedy, sometimes as hosts of quiz and game shows (which came to TV from radio - Kennedy is also the successor of radio figures like Jack Davey and Bob Dyer). But it's *Hey Hey*, I think, which most carries on the tradition now.[16]

Hey Hey differs from nineteenth-century vaudeville in not having show girls or animal acts, though it does have a character called Animal, who silently wanders about the set, walking icon of a crazy world, purely visual signifier of the ludic and World Upside Down, and it does have an orchestra (band) and resident comedienne, Jacky MacDonald. Nor does it have a comedy star like Wallace or 'Mo' around which the whole show might revolve. Rather this is decentred comedy, dispersed through the various figures and performers, who often include the production crew as well.

Hey Hey uses all the technical and audiovisual resources of TV itself to make everyone and everything in the show part of the comedy. We never see John Blackman, for example, who is the off-screen voice doing impersonations and making dry jokes and being ironic and sarcastic about guest acts or other cast members. There are the visual cartoon jokes flashed on the screen during the Red Faces segment. When Media Watch speculates on possible mistakes in TV commercials, a camera will suddenly focus on a producer with a mike surrounded by cameras and cords, who will say what he thinks, though he will earn derision if the others think he gets it wrong. Puppet Ossie Ostrich will comment on everything drily and ironically, while Little Dickie the other puppet, with the blue head held on a stick we occasionally can see, might suddenly rush forward and be rude about someone or something (in turn in one show Ossie commented of Little Dickie that his stick had 'terminal white ant').

In this sense the show revels in the festive abuse that Bakhtin saw as a feature of carnival. In a society where people were "usually divided by the barriers of caste, property, professions, and age", festive abuse overturned hierarchy in social relations, creating an atmosphere of equality, freedom, and familiarity - *Hey Hey* exactly.[17]

In *Hey Hey* all is chaos and anarchy, the reverse of structured sequences with straight person and chief comedian. Daryl Somers the compere is not chief comedian in this sense, so much as a relatively still space across which all the mad traffic of jokes and different comic contributions and voices traverse and clash and comment on each other. If he maintains an ongoing program he is still not a central voice of authority, a ringmaster. For a clear comparison we can call to mind Graham Kennedy in the mid-seventies game show *Blankety Blanks,* where contestants have to match answers with guest stars (the principle of the show being, Kennedy would say, not that answers are correct, but do they match - a comic overturning of positivism). Kennedy, a brilliant comic, uses the other stars in the show as straightpeople for his clowning, always maintaining iron control. Paul Hogan, also an inheritor of the vaudeville tradition of chief comedian, similarly tends in *Crocodile Dundee* to make every character around him a foil for his parody and self-parody, which is one reason, perhaps, why the romance with the New York journalist lacks tension. Daryl Somers never asserts this kind of authority; he barely manages to keep the show flowing.

Traditional stage variety thrived on familiarity and audience involvement.[18] Similarly, *Hey Hey* actively draws on the vast and intimate knowledge that its audience (in the studio and at home) has of the media, of the rest of popular commercial TV. Like *Monty Python's Flying Circus* in the early 1970s, *Hey Hey* is variety for the electronic age in that the media itself is often the material for the comedy - parodying Lotto in Chook Lotto, the media in Media Watch, or talent shows in Red Faces. There is also a quiz segment testing knowledge of pop music. In Red Faces familiarity is important for the comedy, since the audience knows that regular Red Faces judge Red Symons will always score harshly the usually hilariously appalling acts, and so court booing like a villain. (When, one week, Red was launching a rock record of his own and suddenly turned saccharine nice, John Blackman groaned and exclaimed Puke and said this is sickening). When John Michael Howson is wheeled on as a living example of the TV film presenter, he parodies himself, gets regularly insulted by Little Dickie, and is derisively wheeled off at the end.

Involvement by the studio audience is always encouraged, for example, if a show is declared a Sixties night or science fiction night or whatever, Daryl and Jacky and Ossie wear extravagant uniforms and masks and the audience also dresses up - a touch of the masks and disguises of carnival of old, taking people out of their ordinary life and circumstances. In Red Faces if the audience likes an act its support will often override Red's gonging of it.

The festive abuse of *Hey Hey* reminds us that a great deal of popular culture, from carnival in early modern Europe to music hall in the nineteenth-century featured parody and self-parody, not only as a way of mocking received attitudes and official wisdom, but also as a philosophical mode, a way of questioning all claims to absolute truth - including its own. It's a mode that *Crocodile Dundee* also delights in: the film showing in this aspect how much it owes to carnivalesque comedy on TV, and it is perhaps a major reason for its extraordinary popularity.

In these terms, *Hey Hey* represents and builds on in and for the televisual age, a very long tradition of self-reflexivity in popular culture and theatre. The music hall performer would not only directly address the audience, but might also deliberately forget his or her lines, inviting the audience to participate and reveal their intimate knowledge by roaring them out. Television influenced by music hall and vaudeville has inherited this tradition with gusto. In *Blankety Blanks,* for example, Graham Kennedy would frequently jokingly insult his producer and the format of the show and the props and the crew and the stoppages for ads; he would refer to Peter, the young man behind a screen moving a particular prop, as Peter the Phantom Puller, and would say "Pull it, Peter"; once, on Peter's birthday, Kennedy dragged the unfortunate youth out in front of the audience. In *Newsworld* Clive Robertson has transferred this comic style into news presentation itself, though where Kennedy is the trickster, Robertson is the crank - a figure who, in Bakhtin's terms in *The Dialogic Imagination,* stands like the fool outside usual conventions, grumping away at them.[19] Clearly in *Hey Hey,* as we see camera people with their cameras and crew with mikes and cords going everywhere, there is an extreme self-reflexivity.

Crash goes another left pessimist plank. Now there are none.

Left Pessimism and Postmodernism

No longer hegemonic in media and cultural studies, the Left Pessimist Machine nevertheless grinds on, unperturbed by critiques of it or any obstacles of evidence.

An essay on Bakhtin in *New Left Review,* for example, opens with the familiar move, the relating of his theories of past popular culture to modern literary culture. It then calmly intones near its end that the only presence the contemporary working class has in modern culture is the mass culture organised for it, involving a mass spectatorship composed of isolated, private individuals.[20]

A recent issue of *Arena* on media, film and the information society sees a bizarrely fundamentalist version of Frankfurt school theory meet post-modernism, with mixed results. John Hinkson takes Lyotard to task for his benign view of the post-modern information society, which in its very heterogeneity carries the possibility of social relations constituted as open interchange, heightened individuality, local narratives. On the contrary, says Hinkson quoting Marshall McLuhan, the information society is the global village, a total system which instates social abstraction, the terrifying condition when reality is no longer grounded in human presence. Lyotard is simply being naive, ignoring the historical logic that has led to the information society as the latest stage of a repressive totalising system. The printing revolution of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, for example, enhanced the hold of social abstraction over our lives, drawing us ever further away from "human interaction grounded in gesture, the intuitive, the body", where people "know each other tangibly - in the flesh and blood." "Mesmerised" by the telephone, rock culture, and TV, people now have lost knowledge of how to communicate face-to-face. The "attraction" of such mediated communication is so "intense" that we have to conclude that the information industries have taken hold of our lives. We have to get away from all media and instead somehow reestablish the "dominance of relations of human presence". Otherwise, Hinkson foresees, quoting Goethe, the world will become one huge hospital.

In the same issue Scott McQuire is also intensely attracted to a pessimistic vision of the postmodern condition. McQuire realises that TV does not conform to the *Screen* theory critique of being a classic realist text without direct address to the spectator and without self-reflexivity. For TV, with the cunning of a system wishing to perpetuate itself, realised there was this critique around, embodied in radical cinema, and so incorporated direct address and self-reflexivity within itself. It did so with a kind of repressive tolerance, emptying out any radical potentiality such anti-realism might have in alternative media by making it part of the totalising machine of meaningless spectacle and numbing heterogeneity. Because this spectacle only refers to itself, it refuses communication, argument, reason, and the real. In this sense we now experience historical vertigo, a trackless timeless existence in our living rooms, and self-reflexivity becomes a means of nostalgia by which the "present is alleviated of its misery". At the same time, somehow, TV also seems to involve its viewers in a hysteria of certainty and instant solutions, and so a nightmare of homogeneity as well as of heterogeneity. In this crisis, we should think back on a time before TV, before cinema, before the photograph, before the nineteenth-century and the self-consciousness of its notions of History, before Newton, before cities, before ... when there were cultures which functioned by oral tradition, living collective memory, and face-to-face story telling and relationships.[21]

We have come, inevitably, to the disturbing figure of Baudrillard, proclaiming the death of humanity in the post-modern world. As Douglas Kellner suggests in a recent critique, Baudrillard is a kind of Frankfurt school throwback, taking its pessimism about modern mass culture to an extreme (though it's already pretty extreme in *Dialectic of Enlightenment).*[22] The deluge of images, spectacles, simulacra, according to Baudrillard, dissolves any outside, any referent, any reality, any meaning, and hence the social itself. Because of the media, the spectacles of the consumer society, and the information flood, the world is constituted only by simulations, a carnival of mirrors of mirrors, and hence by hyper-reality, images that proliferate and terrorise as they fascinate (it sounds like a snake pit). The hyper-reality produced by the media is matched by the hyperconformity of the masses. The gooey, sticky, blurry omnipresent and ubiquitous media (disgusted sexual metaphors?) has saturated the consciousness of people to such a degree that they are now in a permanent state of narcosis arid mesmerised fascination, of vertiginous sickening silence, in a universe without hope, possibility, value, and life.

McLuhan, Baudrillard feels, was right, the very form of TV is what counts, and this can never allow for participation and response. In his earlier writings in the 1970s Baudrillard turned to anthropology and looked back to a time in 'primitive' society when the reciprocity of the gift ruled; in the present he looks to poetic language and the witticism to deconstruct the fixed codes which constitute social control, and he admires the May 68 students for their involvement in the street, the direct address of their hand-made posters, notices, and graffiti. In any unmediated direct person-to-person conversation and contact there is authentic communication.[23] In his later writings, however, even this hope seems to have been eclipsed by the almighty media system's infinite powers of absorption, cooption and control, as well as the terror of the endless proliferation of mass media images. All is now mere indecipherable noise. He can only look forward to an answering terror and destruction, or to a kind of nihilistic resignation, fetishising objects.

As Kellner says, the valorising of direct face-to-face communication in Baudrillard, and we can extend the wonder to *Arena,* is remarkably simplistic, blithely ignoring that person to person contact can be an arena of domination, manipulation, and concealment. In reply to such nostalgic philosophical anthropology, we might think of the growing body of cultural history and anthropology that points to the strong presence in pre-modern societies of symbolic spaces of the reversible, of fantasy and stories and performances involving inversion of usual person to person relationships. We might think of Victor Turner's argument that many festive practices in premodem societies involve liminal times and spaces of between and betwixt where anything might happen, where everyday rules of social contact can be flouted. We might think of Clifford Geertz's argument, in his essay on the Balinese cockfight, that here Balinese men can play out conflicts and tensions repressed in daily life. Such cultural activity, Geertz argues, is a form of 'deep play', symbolically revealing precisely what is concealed in face-to-face conversation.[24] In similar terms we can argue that melodrama is also a form of 'deep play', that one reason for its vitality and popularity in the nineteenth century (on the stage and in serial fiction) and in this century in radio and TV soap opera - not only in the USA and Australia but increasingly in Third World societies as well - is that it releases and explores all sorts of contradictory tensions, fears, desires, dreams, nightmares, terrors, traumas that cannot be revealed in everyday life and conversation.

In Baudrillard and in these *Arena* essays modern mass culture has a pivotal place, as both symptom and active agent of the Crisis, and as Kellner says, if their pessimistic view of media spectacle and consumer passivity doesn't stand up, then their general 'post-modern theory' also doesn't.

Left Pessimism V, Multiconsciousness

We can also see how much such theory is an extension not only of the Frankfurt School (Adorno, Horkheimer, later Marcuse) but of so many twentieth-century apocalyptic visions, both radical and conservative, from Eliot and Pound to Q.D. Leavis and F.R. Leavis, of modern civilisation as decline, disintegration, death - visions which also pivotally rely on theories of mass culture.

The common thread binding such theories is fear, fear of an invasion of popular culture - for which the readers/listeners/viewers are as responsible as its commercial producers - that is swamping older and finer and more authentic ways, fear of its heterogeneity, its proliferation and swift sudden mixing of images. To such theorists, mass culture all comes to seem the same, is indecipherable noise, is homogeneous: not because it is homogeneous, but because of their own incapacity as intellectuals, trained in the rationalist 'bourgeois public sphere', to read, to play with, heterogeneous, conflicting, diverse, jumbled images and discourses.

It's not the working class in modern history who fear being fascinated, fazed, fragmented, swamped, mystified, bewildered and controlled by the magic attractiveness and seduction of the mass media, because such carnivalesque heterogeneity is what they've always revelled in, thrived on, even created by their willingness to receive it. We can recall the argument of Peter Davison, drawing **on S.L. Bethell's *Shakespeare and the Popular Dramatic Tradition.* The** music hall audience, in responding so swiftly to pathos and irony, intense emotion and parody, sadness and farce, was revealing its capacity for 'multiconsciousness[1]. There is a clear continuity between such multiconsciousness and the capacity of the Elizabethan audience to shift rapidly, even simultaneously, its modes of attention in a theatre where the comic is suddenly interrupted by the tragic, the tragic by the burlesque. It is a centuries-long tradition of drama and of audience response that can be witnessed in later popular theatre, in vaudeville, radio comedy, Hollywood, and TV.[25]

The Bourgeois Public Sphere V. Carnivalesque

Since the left pessimist post-modernists invite us to talk in epochal terms, we can suggest that the incapacity of modern intellectuals, their lack of 'cultural capital[1] by which to 'read' and enjoy in a spirit of 'deep play' modern mass culture is related to the very triumph of the 'bourgeois public sphere' that is the foundation of modern intellectual life.

In their book on the relationship of the bourgeois public sphere to carnivalesque, Stallybrass and White[26] argue that the development of the 'public sphere' in England in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries permitted the emerging bourgeois and professional classes a space of rationality, equality in discussion, democracy in action. There they could develop the exercise of true judgement, wit, refinement and discrimination, within a specific cultural geography. Its sites of discourse were the coffee house, the clubroom, the salon, the assembly rooms of the spas and resorts, the pleasure and tea gardens, the periodical, the journal. This public space was forged not only in opposition to the aristocratic presumption that rank confers intellectual authority, but also in active opposition to the carnivalesque, to the grotesque activities and enjoyments and entertainments of the lower classes in their public space, in pubs, inns, fairs, theatres, shows, circuses, forests. In carnival in early modern Europe everyone had participated, upper and lower estates, if often with contrary and frequently hostile purposes.[27] But with the rise of the T)ourgeois public sphere' the bourgeois and professional classes broke their link with carnivalesque. The carnivalesque became submerged in the unconscious, as a respressed desire for the low and the other. In conscious terms it was regarded as mere entertainment, the merely sensational, without seriousness and aesthetic quality, not art, not knowledge, a mess down there that had to be regulated and removed and cleaned up. For the bourgeois public sphere was forged not only as different from carnivalesque, but as superior, and so charged with a historical mission to instruct, supervise, enlighten.

The plight of the left pessimist strand of postmodernism is the plight not of humanity, the world, the universe, but of their own structure of sensibility, their own limited cultural capital, for their very training in the bourgeois public sphere has made it difficult, for the tertiary educated and middle-class professionals who constitute their social grouping, to be comfortable with the fantastically jumbled, grotesque heterogeneity of the media. It's as if, given their training in rationalism and their lack of training in reading popular culture, they can handle only one text at a time, one discourse at a time, one mode of perception at a time. Yet they can rarely admit this. It is the world which has gone mad, not themselves.

If, by magic, there were socialism tomorrow, one can imagine representatives of the rationalist intellectual culture rushing to join the new order, and as one of their first administrative acts, moving to curtail, restrict, perhaps abolish altogether, popular culture and the mass media. No wonder the working class is so suspicious of the T)ourgeois public sphere' (for which, in Australia, **in media terms, read the ABC, *The Sydney Morning Herald, The Age, The*** *Times On Sunday).* No wonder they stay sceptical. No wonder they resist guidance from those who culturally despise them.

That might be the note to conclude on. The carnivalesque popular culture sphere refuses to lie down and die, to be regulated out of its grotesque life, even if it suffers temporary defeats (as happened to fairs, festive life in the forest, the shows of London, and museums until recently). With the help of modern communication technologies, popular culture remains outrageously omnipresent. The 'bourgeois public sphere' can only respond with revulsion, and look to a simplicity of previous communication, a correspondance of signifier and signified, sign and referent, representation and reality, that never existed. The rejection of modern popular culture relies on a seductive nostalgic anthropology that would be amusing if it were not taken so regularly seriously in the psychopathology of everyday contemporary intellectual life.

Notes

1 **Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), pp.101-2.**

2 **See for example Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980); for just one example of North American interest, see *Studies in Twentieth Century Literature*, n.l, (1984), Special Issue on Bakhtin.**

3 **Tony Bennett et al, *Formations of Pleasure* (London: RKP, 1983), chapters by Grahame Thompson and Tony Bennett.**

4 **Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, (London: Verso, 1979); Adorno, "Television and the Patterns of Mass Culture", in Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White, eds., *Mass Culture* (New York: Free Press, 1975).**

5 **Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", *Screen*, v.16, n.3, (1975). Re puritanic rationalism in relation to the media see John Docker, "Give them Facts - The Modern Gradgrinds", *Media Information Australia* 30, (1983).**

6 **See e.g. Terry Lovell, "Ideology and Coronation Street" in Richard Dyer et al, *Coronation Street* (London: BFI, 1981); Dorothy Hobson, *Crossroads* (London: Methuen, 1982); John**

Docker, "In Defence of Popular Culture", *Arena* 60, (1982); Lorraine Mortimer, "The Construction of Mass Men: The Frankfurt School", *Arena* 65, (1983); Robert C. Holub, *Reception Theory* (London: Methuen, 1984), pp.70-74; Ien Ang, *Watching Dallas* (London: Methuen, 1985); John Fiske, "British Cultural Studies and Television" in Robert C. Allen, ed., *Channels of Discourse* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987).

7 Tania Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance* (New York: Methuen, 1984).

8 Robert C. Allen, "On Reading Soaps: A Semiotic Primer", in E. Ann Kaplan, ed., *Regarding Television* (Los Angeles: AFI, 1983); and Allen's *Speaking of Soap Operas* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985).

9 Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976); **Michael Booth ed., *The Magistrate and Other Nineteenth Century Plays* (London: Oxford** Univ. Press, 1974), Introduction; John Docker, "In Defence of Melodrama: Towards a Libertarian Aesthetic", *Australasian Drama Studies,* no. 9 (1986).

10 Peter Davison, ed., *Songs of the British Music Hall* (New York: Oak, 1971), pp.24-5, 230-33.

11 *Rabelais and His World,-pp.m-lSS.*

12 Ibid., pp.231-239.

13 Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 123-4.

14 *Perfect Match* fanzine magazine, (1985), pp.40-53; *TV News and Gossip,* (1987), pp.42-45.

15 Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford, Stanford Universiity Press, 1975), ch.5.

16 Celestine McDermott, "National Vaudeville", in Harold Love, ed., *The Australian Stage* (Sydney: N.S.W. University Press, 1984), pp.135-143.

17 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World,* pp. 10,16. See also C.L. Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive* *Comedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959).

18 McDermott in *The Australian Stage,* p. 140.

19 *The Dialogic Imagination,* p. 164.

20 Ken Hirschkop, "Bakhtin, Discourse and Democracy", *New Left Review* 160, 1986, p. 111.

21 John Hinkson, "Post-Lyotard: A Critique of the Information Society", and Scott McQuire, "Television: Presenting the Memory Machine", *Arena* 80, 1987.

22 Douglas Kellner, "Baudrillard, Semiurgy and Death", *Theory, Culture and Society,* (1987) pp. 125-46.

23 Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (SL Louis: Telos Press, 1981), ch. 9, "Requiem for the Media".

24 Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1973); Barbara **Babcock, ed., *The Reversible World. Symbolic Inversion in Art and Society* (Cornell: Cornell** University Press, 1976).

25 Peter Davison, *Songs of the British Music Hall* and *Contemporary Drama and the Popular* *Dramatic Tradition in England* (London: MacMillan, 1982); re Elizabethan theatre as carnivalesque, see Michael D. Bristol, *Carnival and Theater* (London: Methuen, 1985).

26 Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London: Methuen, 1986).

27 Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Carnival in Romans* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981); Peter **Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (London: Temple Smith, 1978),** pp.24,270,286.