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THE AUDIENCE COMMODITY: ON THE "BLINDSPOT" DEBATE

Bill Livant

I

Dallas Smythe's recent article, "Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism" obviously struck a sore spot in Murdoch, as the following exchange showed.¹ Much of Murdoch's reply was a defence of Western European Marxist tradition on the question of communications. Smythe has a blindspot himself, Murdoch contends; a "wholesale rejection" based on an "oversimplified view" of this tradition. If Smythe would look more closely, he would find that he "is not alone in insisting that contemporary mass communications systems must be analyzed as an integral part of the economic base as well as of the superstructure" (p. 110). There are others looking at the same spot as he is, but he is blind to them.

It is important to get clear just what the blindspot is. Smythe states a more specific conception of the blindspot than simply the general idea of lack of attention to the economic base of communications. He states it in his first footnote:

None of them address the consciousness industry ... function through demand management (concretely through the economic processes of advertising and mass communications). This is precisely the blindspot of recent Western Marxism. (p. 22)

This is Smythe's attempt to put the finger on the blindspot.

There is a problem with this description, however. His article gives only a passing mention to a dozen Western European Marxists, but he anatomizes Baran and Sweezy in detail. *Monopoly Capital* is his real target, his real point of

departure. Baran and Sweezy, however, have *not* been blind to footnote #1. They are very conscious of "demand management ... through advertising"; they attempt to use this concept to solve their main problem of the disposal of the surplus. Are they not "Western Marxists"?

Of course, and if footnote #1 adequately described the blind spot on which Smythe insists, Baran and Sweezy should escape his criticism. They don't however; they are his chief target. There is something still more specific in the blind spot.

What is the basis of Smythe's criticism? It is that Baran and Sweezy do not see the *audience*. The audience is kind of passive Jello, through which manipulative "waves" are propagated which result in consumption. It is that, by anchoring "demand management" in the concept of psychological manipulation, the audience becomes simply a highway from the production to the consumption of commodities-in-general. Baran and Sweezy have *discovered the reality of the audience*.

Consequently, they miss Smythe's main point. What Smythe calls the "Consciousness Industry" is engaged in marketing the whole sphere of commodities to *audiences which they are also producing and exchanging, as commodities*. Baran and Sweezy do not see that the audience *itself* is the *main* commodity of communications. It is the defining mark of the communications industry. How *this* commodity is made, unmade, bought and sold, is the central problem for analysis. That is what is in the blindspot.

Smythe's "spot", therefore, is both more particular and deeper than he indicated in footnote #1. He began with the problem of marketing commodities-in-general, and through it was led to the production and exchange of audiences as commodities. He was led by the method of Marxism to the particularity of the object of modern communication. This is his major theoretical discovery.

Murdock does not make the error of Baran and Sweezy. He is very aware of the reality, and the activity of the audience. Communications mould, mobilize, demobilize and indoctrinate audiences, but the key condition to grasp in order to study communications "as an integral part of the economic base as well as of the superstructure" is the commodity character of the audience.

The main point Smythe puts to Baran and Sweezy on the one hand, and to Murdock on the other, has a slightly different emphasis within it — but an essential one; for it allows us to take a "binocular fix" on the blind spot which both of them share. To Baran and Sweezy, Smythe says: — in the communications of monopoly capitalism, the first and foremost commodity is *the audience*. To Murdock he says: — the audience, first and foremost, is *a commodity*.²

We can see how difficult this point is to grasp if we look at Murdock's reaction to it.

II

After stating Smythe's general thesis in a paragraph (p. 110), Murdock states that "Smythe deserves credit on at least two counts."

Firstly, in contrast to most Marxist discussions of communications which start from Marx's more obvious statements about ideology, notably *The German Ideology* and the 1859 *Preface*, his analysis is firmly grounded in the central economic works; *Capital* and the *Grundrisse*. This redirection of attention enables him to highlight a number of formulations which have been passed over previously and which deserve the attention of Marxists interested in communications.

Secondly, Smythe's own attempt to apply these insights to the contemporary situation succeeds well in demonstrating their importance for a full understanding of the role of the mass media in capitalist societies. (p. 111)

Period. End of report. Murdock continues immediately:

Unfortunately though, his argument suffers somewhat from overselling. (p. 111)

Then he launches off into his differences with Smythe.

What is striking in his reply is that *none* of these differences deal with Smythe's *discovery*: the audience commodity. None of them contend with, refute, qualify, modify, or develop it. All of his points have the following form: Yes, yes, of course ... but what about the state? Yes, yes, of course ... but what about Europe? ... but what about class struggle? ... but what about ideology? ... but what about media with "minimal dependence on advertising revenue"?

Murdock's critique takes the form of a collection of exceptions to a proposition *which he does not examine*. For him, it seems self-evidently true, but not terribly interesting. Its theoretical meaning is obvious, already exhausted. There is much that is new outside of it, but nothing new *within* it.

We can see Murdock's attitude at work most clearly in the second of his three

main criticisms. Here is where he comes closest to the blindspot, only to pass it by.

2. Smythe's preoccupation with the relations between communications and advertising leads him to underplay the independent role of media content in reproducing dominant ideologies. This is particularly clear in the case of those sectors with minimal dependence on advertising revenue — the cinema, the popular music industry, comic books, and popular fiction. True, they are still articulated to the marketing system through equipment sales (you need a record player to play records), through the use of film and pop stars to endorse consumer products, and through the manufacture of commodities based around film and comic book characters — Star Wars T-shirts, Mickey Mouse soap and so on. But selling audiences to advertisers is not the primary *raison d'être* of these media. Rather, they are in the business of selling explanations of social order and structured inequality and packaging hope and aspiration into legitimate bundles. In short, they work with and through ideology — selling the system.

These non-advertising based media are almost entirely passed over in Smythe's presentation in favour of the press and commercial television which are the examples *par excellence* of his thesis. Although secondary, the sectors he neglects are not exactly marginal. (p. 113)

Murdock notes that the media he mentions above are 'secondary', but he does not tell us why, or how they became secondary. I suggest it is because the process of making and trading *messages* has come to be dominated by the making and trading of *audiences*. This latter aspect of communications reorganizes the former in the service of the new, emerging object of its production.

TV is an 'example par excellence' of Smythe's thesis *not mainly* because of the commercials on the tube. There are commercials in the comics, cited by Murdock, as well. It is mainly because in TV the process of making and trading audiences is most advanced, most visible, and the process of its measurement most developed.

There is a very important difference between buying an ad and buying an

audience. Indeed, when a network — 'private' or 'state' — buys or builds an affiliate, an audience is exactly what it buys, although it buys no ad at all.

The 'ratings war' is no accident and no joke. It expresses in miniature the form of competition under monopoly capital for the communications commodity which has become dominant — the audience. Listen to Mr. CBS and Mr. NBC react to their chagrin over the rise of ABC:

The most sober warning to date has come from CBS-TV's president, Robert J. Wussler, who recently told a group of securities analysts that a costs-be-damned pursuit of ratings could squeeze profits in 1978 or 1979. 'The managing of the television network business is every bit as important as being No. 1', he said, adding, 'By 1980 it's conceivable that the third-place network might be the most profitable.'

'What a comfort,' snaps Paul Klein, NBC's vice president. 'We can all go to sleep and still be profitable. The fallacy is that you then kill your owned stations and affiliates and you spiral down as a network'. He explains that weak ratings, if sustained for any length of time, reduce stations revenues and tempt affiliated stations to switch to another network.

'Sure I'd like to bury the competition with cheaper programs, but it can't always be done. You've still got to pay for a rating point.'

'... Starting in 1974, ABC made heavy investments on series, always the keystone of ratings leadership ... Fifty percent of (ABC executive) Silverman's energies are devoted to maximizing ABC's ratings, and 50% are devoted to depriving other guys of audiences', one network executive says.³

Who here is playing Pangloss and who is facing the bitter truth?

Unlike Murdock, Smythe is attempting to grasp the *motion* of the media as a whole. What is primary and what is secondary about them are questions which are not isolated and not static. For Murdock, however, they are both. This is why he speaks of the media as 'sectors'.⁴ In certain 'sectors' ... (the Smythe sectors) ... *selling audiences* is their primary *raison d'être*. In other 'sectors' ...

(the non-Smythe sectors), it is not; rather, they are in the business of *selling explanations* of social order ... selling the system.

Murdock does not seem to notice that the second "selling" is a metaphor but the first is not. The first is real selling; there are particular buyers, particular sellers and a particular commodity ... a very peculiar commodity ... being made and traded. This second, "selling" is indeed "not reducible to the first." It is not *reducible to it*; but it is *producible from it*. Analysis should begin with the real relation. From such investigations we will learn what the metaphor means; but not vice versa.

Murdock's examples of the "articulation" to the marketing system" of cinema, popular music, comic books and fiction, miss the main point. Not only as Smythe notes (p. 124), is their *content* cross-marketed; their *audiences* are. When "film and pop stars endorse consumer products" ... in fact, when anyone or anything is attached by the media as an endorsement to anyone or anything else ... what is being bought? Murdock sees only the commodity which the viewer or listener may buy, but what is bought in the media is the *audience* for that film star, that pop star, that personality. The movement of prices paid for it indexes the movement, the rise and fall, of that audience. If and when it disappears, that personality commands nothing.

Similarly with "equipment sales" like the record player. Here Murdock points to the purchase of commodities necessary to *consume messages*; the record player, the TV set, etc. It is curious he did not include the record studio, the master tapes, etc., the commodities necessary to *produce* the messages. They, too, are "articulated" to the purchase of commodities-in-general. When we consider them together, we see that *both* of them are necessary to *produce the audience*. When the listener buys his player, he participates in its production.

Of course, he has to buy something to do so. Smythe has documented what a large portion of the cost of the media the audience pays, but to see this as the *main* "articulation" is to mistake the tail for the dog. Media equipment, both the capital goods of message-making and the consumer goods of message-receiving, is produced and sold to produce audiences, not the other way round. It is the *audience* which is being made and traded. One of its clearest indications is the immense growth of the business of measuring it.⁶ Are the audiences for films, for books, for music; in short, for Murdock's "other sectors" being measured? Certainly. It is precisely this that allows the star's audience to be bought and sold.

In *some* of the media, *some* of the time, commodities-in-general are being sold; but in *all* sectors, *all* of the time, the audience commodity is being made. In all sectors it is being traded, in all sectors it is being measured. For Murdock, the "articulation" of various communications media to the

marketing system is effected only *externally*; only through a variety of *other* commodities. The media themselves however, have no *internal* unity. There is no commodity form through which the media are internally articulated.

Only, there *is* such a form: the audience.

III

The historical rise of the audience as the main media commodity, and the subordination of making messages to making audiences, can be observed within the content of the messages themselves. One of the most easily observable differences in content is between the "commercial" material⁷ and the news, features and entertainment; what Smythe calls the free lunch. Audiences surely know it; they go to the bathroom during the commercials.

Both Smythe (pp. 5-6) and Humphrey McQueen (p. 124) make a point of challenging a generally held view of this distinction, and they challenge it in the same way. People have mistaken the dog for the tail and the tail for the dog; consequently, they have misunderstood what wags what:

Commercial mass media are not news and features backed up by advertising; on the contrary, the commercial mass media are advertisements which carry news, feature and entertainment in order to capture audiences for the advertisers. (p. 124)

Why is this point important? Because it enables Smythe and McQueen to *locate* what the commodity of the media *really is*. As long as the correct relation is seen upside down, we are fixed on the "ideas" transmitted; we cannot even ask what the *commodity* is.⁸

When we attend to the commercial messages as the main thing, we see that they are not the objects of exchange; they are more like the medium of exchange. Something else is the object: the audience. As McQueen says,

It is a complete mistake to analyse the relationship between media and advertising by supposing that the media's prime function is to sell advertised products to audiences. On the contrary, the media's job is to sell audiences to advertisers. (p. 124)

Clearly, Smythe and McQueen are forcing us to examine the assumptions we hold about the following question: Just what is "an audience"?

Even to raise the question may cause surprise. What is the problem? Is an audience not as my big *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* says, "a gathering of spectators or listeners as at a concert" or "the readers, hearers or viewers reached by a book, radio broadcast or television program"?

If this question causes surprise, it shows that we think about the concept of an audience in certain ways which are fixed, irrespective of time, place and condition.

(1) We define audiences *by* the *messages* they receive. We start with the messages — the audience for the world soccer match, the audience for jazz, the audience for Bogart movies, etc.

Audiences, of course, can change; there was no TV audience before TV. However, we define this change as depending on the change in classes of messages. In short, we have a message-based definition of audiences.

(2) Therefore, we define *membership* as a relation between a *person and a message* he "receives". Audience membership is a relation we define on a single individual in isolation. The audience as a whole is therefore conceived as an *aggregate* of individuals. There may or may not be "interaction" among members of the audience, but the *definition* of audience-membership is quite independent of this; it is a relation solely between a person and a message.

(3) We define audiences as *receivers*, as "consumers" of these messages. The audience may be active, it may "participate" or not, but the definition of the audience is quite independent of this. It is defined in terms of what is *done to it*, not in terms of what *it does*.

These features are *fixed* points in our conception of the audience. Whatever the historical changes in the audience, we regard its *underlying form* as fixed, as absolute. This form undergoes no historical change.

I believe the line of thinking opened up by Smythe and McQueen lead us to question the fixed character of all these points. Does the commodity form of the audience, the process of making and trading audiences, not lead us to question the message-based definition of the audience? Does the production of the audience for maximum exchangeability among many different classes of messages not lead us to question it? I suggested earlier that it is precisely the subordination of the making of messages to the making of audiences which marks the modern media. It is just this process which Murdock misses.

Are we perhaps in the situation Marx described in discussing the emergence of the idea of *labour* as a general category?

Indifference with regard to a specific kind of labour presupposes a highly developed totality of real kinds of labour, no single one of which is the predominant one any longer. The most general abstractions arise as a rule only together with the richest concrete development, in which one thing appears common to many, common to all. At that point it ceases to be conceivable in a particular form alone ... Indifference towards specific labour corresponds to a form of society in which individuals pass easily from one kind of labour to another, and in which the specific kind of labour is accidental, and therefore indifferent to them. Labour, not only as a category but in reality, has become a means to create wealth in general and has ceased to be organically tied to particular individuals in a specific form. This state of affairs is at its most developed in the United States, the most modern form of bourgeois society in existence ...⁹

Well, well, the United States ... in 1850!

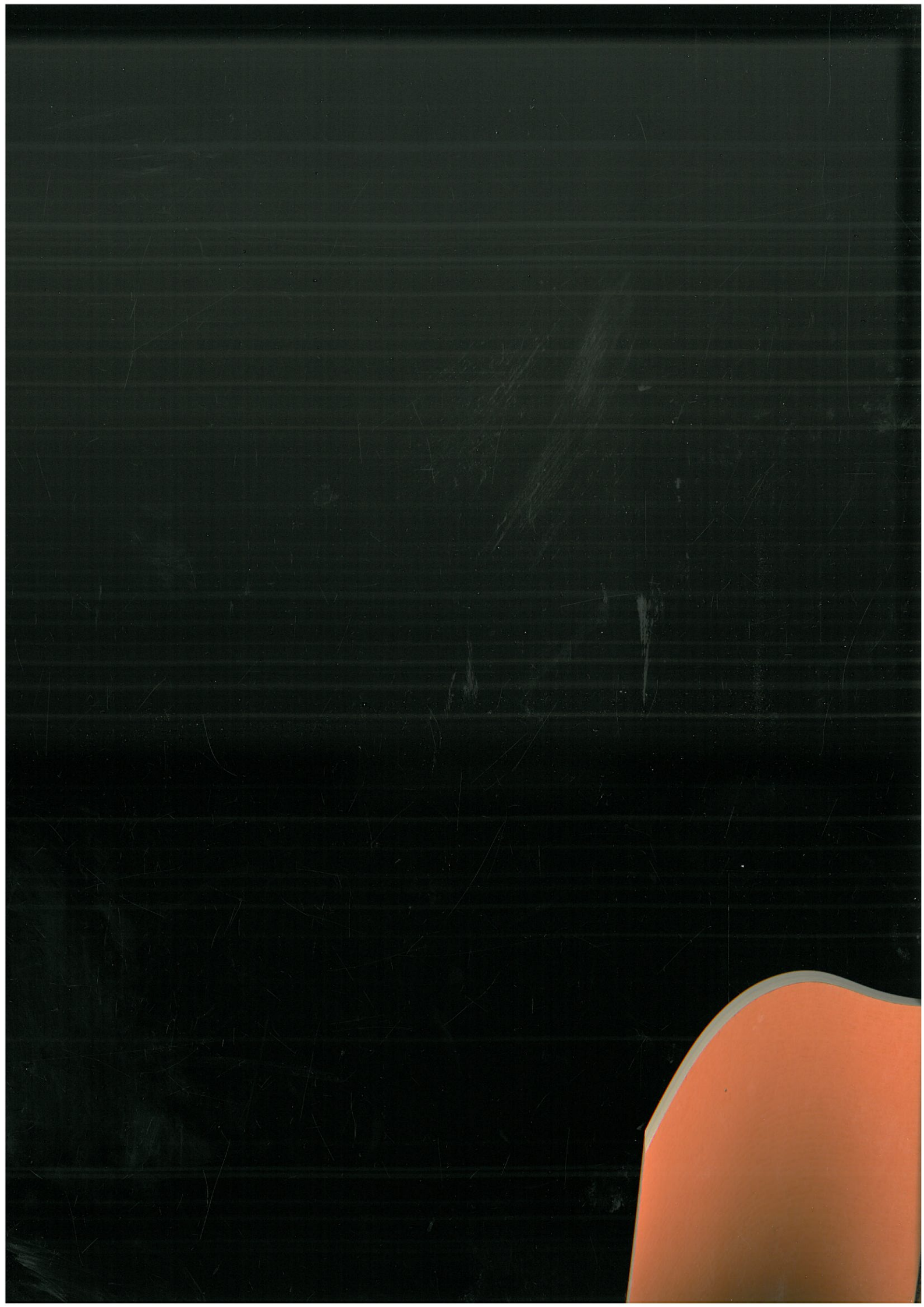
The line of thinking that leads out of Smythe and McQueen requires, I believe, that we break with the message-based definition of audiences. Raymond Williams, cited by Murdock (p. 109) complains that:

'the main error' is that they substitute the analysis of ideology 'with its operative functions in segments, codes and texts' for the materialist analysis of the social relations of production and consumption.

Quite so, and we can extend this point. The analysis of "codes and texts", the method of starting with the message as the basis of everything else has produced the blindspot. The blindspot is the non-historical conception of the audience itself.

IV

The production and exchange of the capacities of audiences to do things is a very modern development. The commodity form of the audience itself is very modern; we are only beginning to grasp the implications of this fact. Smythe



(p. 121) remarks that, "commodities as well as ideas carry ideological meaning." Indeed they do, but we usually acknowledge this observation by examining the ideological meanings of any and all commodities *in-general*. What is the meaning of the stereo bought on time, what is the meaning of the deodorant, etc.? Smythe confines himself to such examples.

However, are there no ideological meanings which arise from the commodity form of the audience itself? I am not speaking here of simply a psychological "transfer", a "carryover" of meanings from the consumption of commodities-in-general to other spheres of social life. I refer rather to the commodity form of the audience *itself* as the basis for the ideological meanings of *all* objects, not just consumable ones. The ideological significance of communications is not restricted to the meanings simply of what audiences *buy*. Murdock and others are correct in pointing this out. Rather, the commodity form of the audience itself is the economic base which carries the commodity form of ideological meanings, meanings not merely of consumption but of the whole domain of social life.

The economic analysis of the audience commodity has barely begun; therefore it is premature for me to do more than suggest how these meanings arise. I believe, however, it is important to focus on the effects of the commodity form of the audience on the production and destruction of the basis of *group membership*.

Once we break through the message-based definition of audiences, we can see that it is not correct to regard a modern audience as simply an aggregate of individual receivers of a common message. People locate themselves in audiences. Therefore, the nature of the movement of these audience-commodities governs the process by which people locate themselves. People strive to locate themselves as *members of groups* within a process which is constantly reorganizing them as *aggregates*.

Smythe (p. 122) touches on one of these ideological effects of the audience-commodity, when he speaks of the capacity of modern media:

to absorb the energies of the population in such a way that the old-style class struggle withers away, and conflict takes on the "demographic" character that Murdock uses to describe it (which happens curiously enough to be the specifications advertisers use to identify the audiences which they buy from the media).

However, there is a *difference* between these "demographic" aggregates

constructed in the media and the groups that people as *members of audiences* try to construct.

We can see this on occasions when the media make errors. Here is an example given by a teacher who used the early morning edition of *Washington Post* to teach English to "illiterate" black teenagers:

The newspapers were an enormous success with the children, but they were something less with the teachers. The children liked everything about them including the relatively large number of typographical errors in the edition we were using. When I asked for this particular edition, Post executives had been unhappy. It was, after all, their earliest and worst. As first edition on the streets of a morning paper, the "bulldog" is rapidly composed and even more rapidly proofed. Consequently, its errors are many and often spectacular. Nothing more certainly guarantees its popularity with young readers.

What could be more exhilarating for a child than to find adult grammar or spelling in error? For the adolescent to discover patterns and reflections of his own imperfections in the successful adult world (*very different from* finding them in the failed adults whom he knows too well) *is to build his faith in the possibility that such a world may also have room for him*. The children glorified in finding misspellings; Cleo and Wentworth were a microcosm of the school in their daily contest to find the most misspelled words. Of course Cleo had the great advantage of being able to read the newspaper openly in her classrooms where it was being used as a textbook. Wentworth was finding it more and more difficult to keep his literacy under cover. (My emphasis.)¹⁰

These are errors on a small scale, I know, but what about those on a large scale?

People know that, today, everyone is in the audience. Their struggle for group membership goes on under the difficult condition that they are being traded as audience commodities, but the groups that *actually emerge* in the audience sometimes hold surprises for the bourgeoisie. We should attend to them.

Smythe has so far focussed his attention on what we might call "consumption-groups". This is a necessary beginning, but they do not exhaust the processes of group production and destruction by the modern media. These await further investigation. I suggest only that the commodity character of the audience itself is the necessary starting point for the study of its ideology.

Still, what is the nature of this audience-commodity; what kind of commodity is it?

V

No element of Smythe's work appears at first so peculiar as the notion that the audience labours. Murdock is completely silent on it. Yet I believe none will prove as important. Once we have gone into the blind spot and located the audience as the central communications commodity, we are forced to ask precisely what it is, precisely what it does.

It is indeed peculiar and it does many peculiar things; this is the main reason we have been largely blind to it. There is a great difference between commodities-in-general and the audience commodity. An historical reminder is appropriate here. The development of production and exchange of commodities constituted a *preparation* for the capitalist system, but the fundamental mark of capitalism is the commodity form of labour. This is the economic foundation of its social formations.

I suggest that in the social formations which arise from audiences as commodities, we see a further development of that same process in the period of monopoly capitalism. It was only on a sufficient preparation of the development of audiences for the exchange of commodities-in-general that *the activities of these audiences themselves could become objects of exchange*. In the development of the modern media, the process moves *from* the production of commodities for sale to audiences *toward* the production of audiences-to-sell. Engels, in speaking of money, described this "breakthrough" well:

Once the commodity-producing society has further developed the value form, which is inherent in commodities as such, to the money form, various seeds still hidden in value *break through* to the light of day. The first and most essential effect is the *generalization of the commodity form*. Money forces the commodity form *even on the objects which have hitherto been produced directly for self-consumption, and drags them into exchange ...* (my emphasis.)¹¹

Therefore, to examine the forms of what the audience *does*, Smythe follows this material development in his theory. He generalizes the commodity form of labour time. In the society of modern monopoly capital ... (and in those "problematic" forms Murdock, p. 112, mentions as well) ... *all* time is labour time. Labour time occupies the totality of time. It has no "holes" in it, no separate pieces outside it, no blank spots, no leftovers. This totality of time as labour time is not homogeneous; there are qualitative divisions within it, but they are precisely *within* it. The labour time is *one* thing, monopoly capital itself has brought all time within the sphere of labour time.¹²

Smythe has opened up the investigation of the forms of the labour of audiences produced and exchanged as commodities. Virtually everyone is organized into the complex tapestry of these audiences, whose underlying properties we are just beginning to understand.¹³ For one thing, the production, destruction, division and recombination of audiences is a vast and turbulent motion. For another, the audience commodity is a *multipurpose* capacity. It is the other side of the labour power that Marx discovered in the production of commodities-in-general, and it is as protean in its capacities.

Smythe has concentrated his study on the *first* great form of the organization of this commodity — the audience commodity as a market. This form emerged historically first and with the greatest clarity in the United States. It is not an accident that Smythe's experience is American and Canadian. A proper understanding of this form and of the experience on which it is based enabled Smythe to discover the commodity character of the audience itself.

This form is the first, *but not the last*. It is not possible at this time to theoretically grasp the multiple forms of the audience commodity when there is still a prevailing theoretical blindness that it even *exists*. The main purpose of these comments is to contribute to clarifying its existence.

The many-sided totality of its labours will not become visible all at once. Marx describes the great difficulty in an earlier period in grasping it; again and again, theory slipped back into one-sidedness:

... It was a great advance when the Manufacturing or Mercantile System put the source of wealth not in the object but in subjective activity — labor in trade and manufacture — but still considered this activity within the narrow confines of money-making. In contrast to this system, the Physiocratic one posits one specific form of labor — agriculture — as wealth-creating ...

It was an immense advance when Adam Smith rejected all restrictions on wealth-creating activity ... How difficult

and immense a transition this was is demonstrated by the fact that from time to time Adam Smith himself relapses into the Physiocratic System....¹⁴

Should we not expect comparable "relapses" in our attempts to grasp the other side of labour which has emerged under *monopoly* capital? I believe so.¹⁵ Smythe's discovery of the audience-commodity, and his generalization of labour time as the tool for its analysis are, in my opinion, two important steps. He unpacks the hidden contents of the blind spot. For there *is* a blind spot. That is why Murdock totally passed it by.

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Notes

1. Smythe, D.W. "Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism", *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, Vol. 1, No. 3, 1977, pp. 1-27.
2. Murdock, G. "Blindspots about Western Marxism: A Reply to Dallas Smythe", *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 1978, pp. 109-119.
3. Smythe, D.W. "Rejoinder to Graham Murdock", *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 1978, pp. 120-129. In this paper, when I cite Smythe and Murdock, it will be to these articles that I refer. Page references 1-27 refer to Smythe's main article, pages 109-119 to Murdock, and pages 120-29 to Smythe's rejoinder.
4. Smythe's original paper contained a detailed critique of Enzensberger as well as Baran and Sweezy. It was on this paper that I wrote my paper, "The Communications Commodity" (Smythe, p. 24, fn. 24). For various reasons, Smythe's critique did not appear in his article in this *Journal*; it appeared earlier in another place *Journal of Communications*, 27:1, 1977, 198-202. This is unfortunate, for it is revealing to consider Baran and Sweezy and Enzensberger together. At first glance, their treatments of communications appear to have nothing in common, but this is deceptive. Baran and Sweezy treat communications simply as a means to induce the purchase of *all* commodities-in-general; there is nothing *peculiar* about communications. For Enzensberger, there is something *very* peculiar about them — in their essence, they have nothing to do with commodities at all. "The mind industry is monstrous and difficult to understand because it does not, strictly speaking, produce anything ... to concentrate on their commercialization is to miss the point." If we look at this carefully we can see that both authors are saying the same thing: *communications has no particular commodity form*. Baran and Sweezy reduce the *particular* problem into commodities-in-general; Enzensberger elevates it into the mind of the manipulator. What unites both authors is what they both *deny*: better, what they do not even see. They will not fit together, for both accounts of communications conceal the same thing. The mixture of the vulgar materialism of Baran and Sweezy and the subjective idealism of Enzensberger is reproduced — in the same place — in Murdock.
5. Splitting apart production and consumption, and establishing an analytical *symmetry* between them blocks investigation into the nature of the object which is being *produced* which includes both "production" and "consumption" in the more restricted sense. It is not an error to study consumption as an *object*. Rather, the error is in the *point of view* of consumption in the study of *any* object. This is why Murdock has missed the appropriate object in his examples. Further, this incorrect symmetry is often carried over invisibly into communications in the analysis of the production and consumption of messages. I touch on this in part III of this paper. Murdock is not the only one who takes the "point of view" of consumption. So do Baran and Sweezy, and their error is more comprehensive. Anwar Shaikh, in his "An Introduction to the History of Crisis Theories" (pp. 219-240, in *U.S. Capitalism in Crisis*, Union for Radical Political Economics, New York: 1978) notes the underconsumptionist essence of the theories of crisis in both Baran and Sweezy's *Monopoly Capital* and Sweezy's earlier *The Theory of Capitalist Development*. Shaikh remarks (p. 229):
The fundamental error in Sweezy's analysis is the traditional underconsumptionist one of reducing Department I to the role of an 'input' into Department II. Once this assumption is made, it necessarily follows that an increase in production of producer goods must expand the capacity of consumer goods. But this is false. ...
6. The underconsumptionist orientation of Baran and Sweezy leads them to liquidate the audience, as I discuss in part I of this paper.
7. See Smythe (p. 4). One of the marks of bourgeois epistemology is the assumption of the independence of the way phenomena are produced and the way they are measured. We seem to have to gaze at the uncertainty principle from physics in order to find the courage to question this notion. In fact, the main impetus to the rise of measurement is the rise of commodity production. Where something begins to be measured it is an almost sure sign it is being traded. Is the assumption of independence a reflection of the petty bourgeois professionals' assumption of their independence from the bourgeoisie? The bourgeoisie "make things happen"; the professionals tell us "what's happening" and how much.
8. Or, for that matter, "political" material in some of those societies Murdock describes (p. 112) as "problematic" from the standpoint of Marxist theory. Is the audience not also bought by the state through its government agencies?
9. It is interesting that both Smythe and McQueen specialize in the political economy of communications, not the analysis of messages. Despite this ... because of it, I would say ... they are able to re-analyze a very revealing difference *within* the field of messages themselves. Their *method* is also of great interest. Notice what they do *not* do. They do not mix functions eclectically and say messages are a "bit of both". Nor do they say that "all messages are ideological" and they are all "selling the system", as Murdock does. For more on this method, see Mao Tse Tung: *On Contradiction*, (part IV).
10. Marx, Karl. *Preface and Introduction to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Foreign Language Press, Peking: 1976, p. 36. Since the Preface is *part* of the Grundrisse, it is not clear why Murdock casts it *outside* of the "central economic work" of the latter. (See my quotation from Murdock in this paper.)

10. Fader, Daniel. *The Naked Children*. Bantam, 1972, pp. 51-2.
11. Engels, F. *Anti-Duhring*. Foreign Languages Press, Peking: 1976, p. 26.
12. Undoubtedly, there is much resistance to this point. Why? Because we still have a "sectoral" view of time, as we found earlier that Murdock has a "sectoral" view of media. Intimately related to this sectoral error is the error of seeing all the time "outside" of labour time as the time of consumption. It is difficult to grasp what can be produced in this "outside" time, or by whom. This view leads quite naturally to an emphasis on the *passivity* of people in their "outside" time. The way is thus prepared for the concept of *manipulation*. Smythe has discovered this concept consistently in the literature; and he correctly objects to it.
13. Smythe refers to "the organization of the labours of the audience as a commodity, as 'mind slavery' ... 'a kind of ideological tunnel vision'" (p. 121). I think this expression detracts from the direction of his work; it relapses back into the psychological manipulation frame of thinking for which he properly criticized Baran and Swezey. Smythe may consider "mind slavery" the other side of Marx's "wage slavery". If it meant to point out the reality of constraint within the appearance of freedom, it is not too misleading, but Marx did not use the analysis of slavery to *discover* the true nature of the wage relation, of surplus value, etc. Quite the contrary; the analysis of the wage relation illuminated some of the illusions of slavery. In short, "mind slavery" does no analytical work.
14. Marx, Karl, *op. cit.*, pp. 36-7.
15. Smythe's work, past and present, focusses on the audience commodity as a market for the purchase of commodities-in-general. Thus his attention is on its place in the economy as a whole. By contrast, I focus on what I regard as Smythe's central discovery — this multipurpose audience commodity itself. The main error previously was to dissolve it away into something else, thus making it invisible. In my focus, however, one can fall into the opposite error of separating it from everything else. I think this error can be avoided. After all, what is the *main task now*? To open up the blind spot, and try to show what is *inside*. That "blind-spot" is not just a metaphor. It is truly a *hole*, in the exact sense of its Indo-European etymology; not an *empty* place but a *hidden* one.

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CRITICAL THEORY AND PRACTICE: A RESPONSE TO BEN AGGER

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Despite its limitations, Ben Agger's attempt in *Dialectical Sensibility I & II* (CJST I, 1 & 2) to provide an orientation for contemporary critical theorising has the merit of thematising most of the key issues. In the politically, ideologically and theoretically confused aftermath of the 1960's, the emancipatory project needs philosophical clarification. Any coherent metatheoretical proposal addressed to that end is indeed to be welcomed — if only as a provocation to debate.

Agger's vision of how radical intellectuality ought to develop has a great deal of appeal, especially for those of us grappling with the uncomfortable antinomies of academic existence. Critical theory, emancipated from the elitisms of party and school, re-integrates itself with mass politics by identifying itself with the social and anthropological self-consciousness of actual rebellious constituencies; at the omega point, criticism finally loses its character as a separate, specialised activity altogether and merges into the universal "dialectical sensibility" it has engendered. Unfortunately, Agger's position is vitiated by the very qualities that give it resonance. His particular distillation of early Marx, Marcuse and Freire expresses a form of self-negating moralistic utopianism that is all too prevalent in the contemporary intellectual left. Agger's recommendations deserve serious attention; their inadequacy points towards a critique of the perspectival matrix within which they have been generated, and which in my view must itself be transcended in any project of re-vitalising and re-politicising critical theory. Without pretending to be systematic, the following more specific objections to Agger are being advanced.

1. The Frankfurt Question.

In *Dialectical Sensibility I*, Agger's negative evaluation of the Frankfurt