

Popular Communication After Globalization

By Joshua Gunn and Barry Brummett

The study of popular communication is carried out in many disciplines and many sites. It is often haunted by anxieties over high culture versus low culture and authenticity versus commercialization. Rejecting those binaries in favor of the dominance of the latter term in each, this article initially defines popular communication as objects widely circulated by mass media, texts to which people are widely exposed. Such texts are themselves commodities, and the meanings the texts facilitate are key. Scholars of popular communication usually espouse a leftist political agenda. They focus on signs that reveal processes in social or psychological experience, although some studies focus more on forms of discourse. The article proposes that studies in popular communication may be distinguished by whether they focus on rhetoric, text, or audience. It concludes by urging a stance of critical populism, more popular involvement by scholars, and a greater understanding of erotics, or desire, in our work.

Around the long table of this special issue gathers a motley communication family. Some of the venerable, hoary relatives seated here have an indisputable right to attend based on long acceptance in the academy. Others seem like rather distant cousins of doubtful ancestry. We don't quite know them, or see the family resemblance in their young faces. Worse yet, some may resemble the discipline next door. Popular communication is likely to be in this latter category: Whose child is it, and who invited it? What sort of side dish did it contribute to the feast? Because we have been disciplined as members of a disciplinary community, we will eventually resort to defining the term "popular communication." Let us begin,

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however, by acknowledging some scholarly anxieties that fuel the drive to study, define, and therefore fix, the “popular.”

Any cursory genealogy of the study of popular objects in communication studies reveals a general dis-ease about the popular in relation to theory, method, and most especially, audience. We locate this anxiety in two persistent conceptual binaries. First, the popular is haunted by the high culture–low culture binary. From the sociological examination of mass culture or the culture industry as a means of social control (Adorno, 2002; Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002; MacDonald, 1957; Williams, 2001b), to the social scientific concern with violence and other media effects (especially among youth; Gunter, 1994; Lowery & DeFleur, 1995), to the growing interest in the rhetorical and political significance of film, television, music, and the Internet (Brummett, 1991; Frenzt & Farrell, 1975; McLeod, 1999; Rushing, 1989; Stromer-Galley, 2000), anxiety about studying the popular has been related to the fear of a mindless, mass audience in one form or another. A corollary anxiety is a fear that the texts that preoccupy such audiences are trivial and not worth studying. Although media effects researchers have long since discredited the view that media outfits exercise a magical, propagandistic power over audiences (Cawelti, 1985; Lowery & DeFleur, 1995; Bryant & Zillman, 1994), and although few scholars would openly subscribe to the view that popular audiences are “passive consumers” (MacDonald, 1957, p. 60), we suspect that the study of popular communication continues to provoke concern for some scholars because of a lurking suspicion that popular audiences are as stupid and tasteless as the texts they consume. Although these concerns had long been negotiated by communication scholars in England (e.g., Hoggart, 1998; Williams, 1983, 2001a, 2001b), and although neighboring disciplines in the humanities have moved beyond the mass culture debates (see Strinati, 1995, pp. 1–21), in some sectors of our field these worries continue to manifest themselves in variations of a high culture–low culture binary (particularly in ways that model the Hellenic elitism of Matthew Arnold; compare Arnold, 1994, pp. 1–134; Medhurst, 1989; Tavener, 2000; and Wolff, 1999). Understanding the persistence of this binary is important for communication critics insofar as studying popular objects can signal a scholarly affiliation with the rabble and, by extension, the leftist agenda of cultural studies. Hence popular has a double signification, reflecting a theoretical, methodological, and ultimately political, allegiance within the field as much as it signifies a type of studied object.

Anxieties about studying the unwashed popular are typically addressed through recourse to a common synecdochic justification: The popular object has been said to be a symptom or index of larger, social processes, forms, or structures (T. Frenzt, personal communication, January 2, 2004). Significant phenomena can thus be studied through their trivial (popular) symptoms. In a recent article on the speech characteristics of male and female actors in prime-time television shows, for example, Zhao and Gantz (2003) began by arguing that “the way in which people, particularly women, are portrayed and treated in the media reflects and reinforces commonly held beliefs about them in society at large” (p. 347). Similarly, Robert E. Terrill’s (2000) psychoanalytic reading of the film, *Batman Forever*, began by suggesting that “the critic [can read] contemporary culture from [filmic

texts] by exploring the inventional resources—patterns and forms through which meaning might be made of experience—such texts offer their readers,” ultimately because such texts provide the “available means through which experience might be given meaning” (pp. 494–495; also see Dine, 2000; Terrill, 1993). In other words, scholars typically locate the value and significance of studying a given popular object in terms of its reflective and representational character. Consequently, insofar as a popular object is not examined in terms of a larger political or ideological category, form, or structure, it is often dismissed as an uncritical, “sentimental” celebration of “media and consumer culture”—a charge that has plagued the research of Bowling Green’s Popular Culture Association since its formation in the late 1960s (Kellner, 1995, pp. 33–34; also see Schudson, 1987).

A second binary is a perceived opposition between authenticity and commercialization or globalization. Students of the popular often confront this long-standing critical habit: We write as if there is a fundamental difference between a mass-produced and mass-marketed culture and a more authentic “folk” culture or subculture. Such a binary is dissolving into a globally marketed culture. A few remaining pockets of folk culture remain here and there: on the Sea Islands, in Amish country, in departments of English. The rest of folk culture is now 50% off at Walmart. With the arrival of postmodernity, understood here as cultural globalization, transnational capitalism, and the general “implosion” of representation and reality (Baudrillard, 2000, 1988, 1981; Brummett, 2003; Hardt & Negri, 2000), we can no longer maintain such a binary distinction between the authentic and the marketed; conceptually at least, the popular has become a mediated multiplicity of the ubiquitous and the everyday.

Insofar as the popular has globalized, the question remains whether the term popular communication denotes something coherent. Certainly there is a sense in which the popular continues to signify “a set of generally available artefacts: films, records, clothes, TV programmes, modes of transport, etc.” (Hebdige, 1988, p. 47). Yet as the machinery of mass production and the regimes of representation continue to expand and speed up, the number of artifacts and practices that one could conceivably collect under aegis of the popular continues to multiply. Given the fact that a large amount of communication scholarship concerns what could be considered as popular in one way or another, in what follows we propose not so much a comprehensive review, but a reaction or, if you like, a polemic, in which we give our responses, fears, and hopes for a scholarly industry that is clanking away in multiple shops. We divide our effort into three parts: a consideration of popular communication as an object of study, a consideration of popular communication as a politics of theory and method, and a combined prediction and preference for where work in popular communication is headed.

Defining the Popular Object

Within the organizational structure of the International Communication Association, Popular Communication names a division that concerns itself with the study of a wide ranging, loosely connected set of phenomena. In other journals, disci-

plines, and organizations, the same scholarly unit might call itself popular culture, media criticism, critical studies, cultural studies, or something similar. Whatever the community of scholars may call itself, the work being done within each grouping is held together loosely by a set of problems and issues, a preference for certain kinds of methods, and a commitment to certain political perspectives.

In attempting an overview of such a diverse body of scholarly work, we are reluctant to define that work neatly. Instead, we propose to name the center of it: Among communication studies scholars, popular communication concerns the study of objects that are widely circulated by means of mass media. These objects are studied with a view toward explaining their meaning, structure, and impact. Over the past 5 years, the most popular objects of analysis have been television programs and advertisements (e.g., Grabe, 2002; McAllister, 2002; Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles, 2002; Segrin & Nabi, 2002), films (e.g., Owen, 2002; Rushing & Frenz, 2000; Shugart, 2003), and Internet web pages (e.g., Jordan, 2003; Kubey, Lavin, & Barrows, 2001; Stromer-Galley, 2000), with an increasing focus on globalization, "Americanization," and the international media (e.g., Avraham & First, 2003; Natarajan & Xiaoming, 2003). The preferred methods for this work vary from one journal to the next, particularly along a loose quantitative and qualitative divide. The level of impact studied with either approach varies as well; much of the qualitative work tends to be cultural and structural in focus, while social scientific approaches seem more functionalist in approach (e.g., Livingstone, 2003).

Because the body of work under question is usually considered in terms of its impact on a wide swath of a whole culture, the term "culture" is very often linked to that of "communication," and in the context of this article, the terms are interchangeable (we stress, however, such a conflation is a tendency specific to the field of communication studies). A scholar may claim to study popular culture, or more specifically the rhetoric of popular culture, and be toiling within the same web that we are spinning here. In identifying mass media as a part of the center of the study of popular communication, however, we mean to address the question that is sometimes raised as to whether there is a conceptual difference among popular culture, mass culture, vernacular culture, and other denominations of culture (Kellner, 1995, pp. 33–35; Lipsitz, 1990, pp. 12–20). In principle, yes, there is a distinction, but we believe that the scholarship under review here is collectively pointing to a state of affairs in which culture is increasingly homogeneous precisely because of the effects of mass mediation and its connection to late capitalism and technology. As numerous communication scholars have argued or implied, local or vernacular cultures are increasingly merging into popular, mediated culture, which is thus becoming global culture (Kraidy, 2002; Parameswaran, 2002; Shome & Hegde, 2002a, 2002b). This is, indeed, one of the chief effects of popular communication as a global and globalizing force, which is reflected in the increasingly interdisciplinary character of communication studies as a discipline. In other words, the universalization, or popularization, of the popular as a type of critical object is an effect of the melding and interchange of cultures in general (for related disciplinary trends with cultural studies and rhetoric, see Gaonkar, 1997; Grossberg, 1993; Schiappa, 2001). Although it is certainly the case that terms like "popular culture" or "popular communication" collapse the distinction be-

tween artifacts “produced by the people . . . [and] mass mediated culture” (Kellner, 1995, p. 33), we think that the resulting lack of specificity is indicative of the time in which we live.

From a pragmatic standpoint, we identify four key formal features of popular communication: First, popular communication consists of objects that are mass distributed, mass mediated, and (thus) commodified; second, popular communication is widely circulated, employed, and struggled over in everyday practices; third, popular communication works by facilitating meanings that are the building blocks of cultural phenomena such as identity and collective memory; and fourth, popular communication has its greatest effect at a structural level governing ideology, including notions of race, gender, class, sexual identity, and so forth.

Popular, of course, refers to a people or population. Popular communication is thus concerned with those objects—or, as we rhetoricians prefer, texts—to which people are widely exposed. In the contemporary Western world, that exposure is remarkably consistent for many of us, and it has some important characteristics. First, the texts that comprise popular communication are widely distributed, insofar as texts are understood as collections of signs that contribute to a collective set of meanings or functions, experienced as a unity—even though those meanings may be diverse, contradictory, and struggled over (Brummett, 1994, pp. 3–32). A film is such a set of signs, so is a football game, or the latest tabloid newspaper. It is possible that some texts like that are circulated only locally, more likely that they are circulated at least regionally, and increasingly likely that they are circulated nationally; the circulatory trend is toward width. A magazine that is read in Maine is likely also read in Florida, and a style of sweatshirt popular in California high schools may well also be seen in Minnesota (see Hartley, 2000).

Such circulation does not happen by delivering these texts by hand; they are of necessity mediated if they are circulated en masse, and the means for such distribution are usually electronic. The *USA Today* that shows up by your hotel door may seem irreducibly material, but most of its existence was spent in the form of electrons. Thus, the mass mediation necessary for widespread circulation of texts of popular culture is complicated, sophisticated, and expensive. Someone must be paid for circulating them, and someone will make a profit. Although texts of popular communication are used by publics in everyday life and practices, they are widely distributed at a global level through sophisticated technology to serve major corporate interests. In this sense popular communication is not so much the isolated “great event,” the circus come to town, Mr. Lincoln passing through, or the peak moment of presidential debate, but rather, the media representations of such events and their circulation among publics for a profit. Texts of popular communication today are in nearly every case commodities, objects that are created to be sold. Exceptions to that claim arise from time to time, often out of remnants of local, vernacular cultures, but to the degree that they circulate to any significant extent those texts will be caught up by the raptors of late capitalism and put on sale at Best Buy by the end of the week.

What these everyday texts do as they circulate and as they are struggled over is mediate and articulate, facilitating the formation of meanings (Brummett, 1994, pp. 69–70; Kreiling, 1978, pp. 240–241). Despite relatively recent calls to abandon

the concept (about which there is more below; see Fornäs, 1999; Grossberg, 1999), meaning is key to most studies of popular communication and it is what the studies explicate. Meaning is understood to be key to larger, vital cultural issues that are the subjects of the study of popular communication. Studies that show how texts create or challenge collective memory, personal or group identity, history, and so forth are essentially studies of the complex, often contradictory meanings those texts facilitate, and ways in which those texts can be sites of struggle over meaning (Barthes, 1994, 1972; Brummett, 1994, pp. 68–70; Fornäs, 1999; Hall, 1980, 1992a, 1992b). Meaning is studied as an agency of influence, but also as the very prize itself, the goal of influence.

Semiotics has taught us that meaning is differential and rarely something that emerges fully grown from single, important communicative experiences. What it means to be queer or straight, Asian or Hispanic, wealthy or blue collar, is something that is created by the mediation of culture via the many circulations of texts over a long period of time. Studies of popular communication thus tend to look at these broad, cross-situational levels of structure as the site of communication effects. Distrustful of an ability to identify the effects of single messages, or to trace the influences on single actions, students of popular communication tend to take the long view in studying the effects of everyday texts on social structures writ large.

In sum, then, the kinds of objects studied by scholars of popular communication are texts that are widely circulated through means of mass mediation in the form of commodities. They are circulated, consumed, and struggled over in everyday contexts. The main effect of such texts is the creation of meanings, and those meanings are assumed to be most influential at a structural level. Beyond these broad strokes, however, we admit that the popular object is increasingly difficult to characterize precisely because of the rapidity and ever-expanding circulatory networks of our global “monoculture.” Although there are certainly networks of circulation that resist and oppose homogenization—and we agree that it is very important to continue to locate and promote them—in postmodernity, the form of the popular object continues to outpace content. The increasing speed and reach of the circulation of popular objects, in other words, threatens to make every meaningful object popular in the future. So although we have demonstrated that one can describe the common features of popular communication with a survey of the practice of communication scholars, understanding the concept in terms of a set of particular objects or texts is becoming increasingly problematic. We suggest that a better way to understand popular communication is in relation to the theories and methods employed to study it, which reveals, we think, the most settled and often unspoken signification of popular: a political allegiance within the discipline.

The Theoretical Politics of Pop

In his essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility,” originally published in 1936, Walter Benjamin (2002) argued that the advent of rapid,

technological reproduction was destroying what he termed the “aura” of art. Understood as the symbolic and physical distance of an artifact from an audience, as well as the intersection of myth, tradition, and ritual value afforded to the artifact, the aura courted religiosity and worshipfulness. The emergence of reproducible arts—namely photography and film—argued Benjamin, replaced the theological basis of art with politics:

for the first time in world history, technological reproducibility emancipates the work of art from its parasitic subservience to ritual. To an ever-increasing degree, the work reproduced becomes the reproduction of a work designed for reproducibility. From a photographic plate, for example, one can make any number of prints; to ask for the “authentic” print makes no sense. *But as soon as the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applied to artistic production, the whole social function of art is revolutionized. Instead of being founded on ritual, it is based on a different practice: politics.* (2002, p. 106; emphasis in the original)

Not only are Benjamin’s observations homologous to the story we have been telling about objects of popular culture, but they also speak to a shift in perspective in respect to the popular and a new legitimacy for studying the “low” and decidedly unauratic objects “of the people” (Williams, 2001a, 1985). Whereas the discipline formerly known as speech communication revered the exemplary auratic text or model speech, the transformation of department nameplates to communication studies represents a shift of attention to a revolutionized text, insofar as almost any cultural object can be read these days as a communicative text (Farrell, 1993; McGee, 1990; Mowitt, 1992). The study of popular culture in U.S. communication studies represents a political decision to understand something other than the discourse of cultural elites. In this Benjaminian sense, communication studies has lost its religion.

Although our social scientists seem to have had less trouble arguing for the study of popular communication, communication critics, particularly of the rhetorical stripe, did not begin taking up popular texts until the 1970s, and the justifications for doing so frequently resembled those offered much earlier by scholars from the Frankfurt School and the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies: One studies the “working class,” the popular, the mundane, and the everyday because they delimit the central terrain of the political and the space in which ideology interpellates and mediates a public (e.g., compare the justifications of Adorno, 1994, and Frenzt & Farrell, 1975).

Some years ago one of us was subject to a tirade from the chair of a communication department in the American West. In an angered tone he lambasted the dossiers of scholars who had applied for a position in rhetorical studies because, he said, most of them conducted research on popular culture. He argued that rhetorical studies had abandoned the “political” in favor of the insignificant detritus of the plebes, and that this sounded the death knell for communication criticism. We reject his bifurcation of the political and the popular. For some scholars, at least, choosing to study popular communication entails a commitment to the

idea that power, influence, and suasion are not in the hands of political figures or cultural elites, an idea that is more akin to Marxism than Hellenism. Indeed, almost all of the methods used and perspectives adopted to study popular communication, especially those that have come to us under the heading of critical/cultural studies, entail a debt to Marx (Barthes, 1972; Fiske, 1989; Grossberg, Nelson, & Treichler, 1991; Hall, 1980; Hebdige, 1979; Morley, 1980). Further, aside from the political allegiance one makes when choosing to study the popular, the manner in which one does so will also signal an alliance. Because method is so often taken from the tracts of a father of the particular scholarly church to which one confesses, it is always more than a set of procedures. Method in the study of popular communication is a scholarly way of life, a way of thinking generally about communication and life, and for this reason method and theory are often indistinguishable as a politics.

Among those who are interested in popular communication, a number of theoretical perspectives have emerged that evidence a continued left-leaning agenda. (We note the paradox of leftist academics engrossed in the deconstruction of the globalization and commercialization that make their efforts possible—this dragon grows the tail it eats.) Using national communication studies journals as an index of trends, the objects of popular culture are being examined, increasingly, in terms of their global circulation (e.g., DeLuca & Peeples, 2002; Shome & Hegde, 2002a; Zacharias, 2003). The most popular approaches are drawing from, and contributing to, postcolonial theory (e.g., Kraidy, 2002; Parameswaran, 2002; Shome & Hedge, 2002), feminist and queer theory (e.g., Brookey & Westerfelhaus, 2002; Cooper, 2002; Herman, 2003; Shugart, 2003), media ecology (with a renewed interest in McLuhan and Baudrillard; e.g., Brummett, 2003; Rufo, 2003), and public sphere theory (particularly in terms of “counterpublics”; e.g., Asen, 2000; Greene, 2002; Owens & Palmer, 2003; Squires, 2002; Warner, 2002). Across the wide range of different methods used to forward these approaches, many share a focus on signs, images, aesthetics—in general, on surfaces. Many also tend to share a concern for explicating meaning and do so by arraying one text literally in the terms of another.

Although many communication scholars are interested in psychological or cognitive events, scholars of popular communication tend not to assume that signs—words, images, and so forth—reflect unconscious processes that are going on elsewhere (in the head, in society; recent work on cultural amnesia, collective memory, and the idiom of “haunting” are notable exceptions; see Foss & Domenici, 2001; Haskins, 2003; Stormer, 2002; Vivian, 2002; Zelizer, 1995). Signs are not only the tools with which communication is carried out and rhetorical struggles are fought, signs are regarded as the terrain on which such symbolic action takes place. Because terrain is often what is struggled over in military action, signs and the management of signs themselves are regarded as the goal and end of communication. For these reasons, methods in the study of popular communication focus on the surface of texts, of life: on signs, images, language, aesthetics, the look, the feel. An assumption seems to be held, whether it is made explicit or not, that thought, social arrangements, indeed life follow from those surfaces, that it is on these symbolic, signifying surfaces that what we think and how we feel is worked out. A commitment in so many studies of popular communication to appearance

and spin, to image and language, is not a preoccupation with the trivial, but is a choice to analyze what is taken as the main engine of social and psychological creation and change.

In describing the objects of studies of popular communication, we have stressed the centrality of meaning because we believe that ferreting meaning is methodologically central to the scholarship in review. Across the many different methodological approaches, meaning is usually explicated by mediation, arraying one discourse in terms of another. Because of the focus on the surface, scholars of popular communication believe that the most enlightening method is not to show what a given word or image really “is,” but rather to show what and how it means by explaining how it might be translated in the terms of another discourse. That “other discourse” is often one provided by the sacred text and founding scholar of one’s methodological approach. If one is doing a Burkean analysis, one translates the terms of one text (say, a film) into the terms found in some part of Kenneth Burke’s work (calling the film by the names of the Pentad, or of the representative anecdote, or of teleology, and so forth). To put this another way, if someone asks you to explain what a dog is, you have two ways to do it. One is to go get the furry object in question and wave it before your interlocutor. Another way is to say what “dog” is in other words: “Oh, well, you see it’s this four-legged mammal descended from the wolf, etc., etc.” Scholars of popular communication tend to follow the second method.

Although we believe that a majority of those who would consider themselves popular communication scholars continue to feature the concept of meaning, a recent strain of theory has emerged that brackets the search for meaning in favor of “form-sensitive analyses of public texts, events, and practices” (Gaonkar & Povinelli, 2003, p. 386). Instead of plumbing popular cultural texts or articulating them to other texts in search of a hidden or previously unseen meaning (a hermeneutics), newer approaches to studying popular phenomena have tended to focus on the movement and flow of power, objects, or even logics, within global networks, within social imaginaries, and among populations, publics, and counterpublics (Asen, 2000; Greene, 1998). Owing to the universalization of the popular and the consequent focus on form described above, it is no surprise that “circulation” and “circuit” are central tropes of this strain of theory, which has developed from a number of poststructural bases: Foucauldian and Deleuzian approaches to culture, public sphere studies, and cultural studies (see Greene, 1999, 2004; Grossberg, 1992, pp. 37–87; Johnson, 1996, pp. 80–85; Warner, 2002, pp. 90–96). Methods of criticism among this newer thrust are characteristically cartographic and genealogical (as opposed to semiotic, etc.), and despite a densely descriptive focus on historical detail, the analyses offered within our field thus far remain fairly abstract. We suspect that as the theoretical commitments and complexities of this newer theoretical trend are worked out (mostly in the pages of *Communication Theory* and *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, and certainly the new NCA journal, *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*), more and more studies in the field will resemble the kinds of cartographic criticism found in more interdisciplinary journals like *Public Culture*. For example, in a recent article in that journal, Rafael (2003) examined how the text-messaging

feature on cell phones enabled a middle-class fantasy of transcendent power during the recent overthrow of President Joseph Estrada in the Philippines. Although one might deem text messaging a popular practice, Rafael's focus is more on the way in which communicative technologies transform popular imaginaries, enabling and hindering social change. Rafael focuses on formal networks and the circulation of discourse without recourse to a hermeneutic.

Nevertheless, insofar as the central methodological assumption of every theoretical trend is that everything is surface, then it is easy to see why the study of popular communication comes alive in the word or image of the printed page (alas, we seem not to have caught our scholarship up with the electronic world in which real people live; more on this below). It is on exactly such printed pages, or for so many people, on the electronic page of the screen, that the most important social arrangements are struggled over. The methods and perspectives of study that have emerged are thus methods of engaging both scholar and audience in social and political action, and it now seems the case that a central premise of cultural studies, that theory and method are forms of political and social action in their own right, has been adopted by many communication studies scholars as well.

Finally, in explicating what is happening in the texts that are widely circulated in the population, scholars of popular communication inevitably take a stance as to where the real engine of rhetorical effects, of communicative impact, lies. As rhetoricians, we suggest that in spite of newer cartographic and genealogical trends, it is still useful to think of the grand overarching trio of rhetor-text-audience as a structure for explaining where the emphasis is placed. We suspect that scholars of popular communication will tend to say or imply or assume that communication works as it does because of one of these three terms. We argued in this section that scholars emphasize the signs and images that make up the text, and thus implied in our argument is a claim that most students of popular communication remain text oriented, or at the very least, surface oriented.

Concluding Remarks: Toward a Critical Populism

In answer to the question whether popular communication or popular culture remains meaningful as a category after globalization, in this article we have answered "yes" in two ways. First, a survey of research on popular communication in our field reveals that the category does continue to denote—tenuously—an object with a number of formal features, one of the most fundamental being that it is *circulated*. Under conditions of postmodernity, continuing to maintain the category with reference to a particular kind of object is increasingly difficult. Hence, we suggested that the better way to understand popular communication concerned identifying the common, politically implicated thrust of theories and methods. We conclude that popular communication, fundamentally, refers to a leftist political orientation of scholarship that deliberately avoids the study of elite culture in favor of the objects of everyday life.

As we promised, this overview of the scholarship in popular communication will end on a note of exhortation. If one dimension of the methods such scholars

use is to engage scholar and reader with social and political issues, we believe that the whole project of the study of popular communication invites ongoing self-examination and assessment as to where the trend of scholarship is going and where it should go—especially in terms of social and political issues. In this concluding section, we argue that scholarship in popular communication should, first, promote a kind of *critical populism*, working toward a continued disavowal of the valorization or celebration of elite or canonized cultural objects, as well as toward addressing a more popular audience from the stance of the public intellectual; second, that it should move toward clearer grounding in the erotic, that is, toward understanding the order of desire at work in late capitalism; and finally, that it should move toward engagement with multiple or dispersed texts.

As a kind of content, popular communication should continue to study the everyday stuff within which we live and move and have our being (to the exclusion of, say, Pericles's funeral oration or the president's latest address). The parade of texts that pass by us on television, the car radio, on people's bodies, and so forth are the sites of major influence today. People are no longer struggling over great ideas in political debate because they are struggling over great ideas as expressed on television and film. People used to gather 'round the cracker barrel to manage their lives; today they gather around screens and speakers. We do not mean to summarily dismiss the import of elite discourse, for example, presidential speech craft, for clearly the discourse of the nation-state and other elite cultural institutions continues to influence social reality, popular or otherwise. We mean to emphasize, however, that the circulation of elite discourse is increasingly narrow and that a commitment to the study of popular communication requires scholars to place more emphasis on the widely circulating texts of everyday life. Of course, scholars will differ over how one-way, monolithic, and unitary are the influences of these widely circulated texts, and some lines of research will continue to find a fair bit of subversion and struggle over meanings. Whatever their effect, popular communication is the seamless everyday stuff of our experience that connects us to the global distribution networks for those texts. One way or another, we are all the Borg.

In addition to committing ourselves to the analysis of the common and everyday, we also would encourage a critical populism of speaking and conversing with nonacademics. This exhortation should not be read alongside the usual academic bewailment of a small and insignificant audience for journal articles. Academics publish articles, and the good ones are circulated among other academics who then pass the ideas in those articles on to quite a significant audience: students. The stock complaint that only 20 people will read your article or book ignores the fact that those 20 might each teach 100 or more students a year, students who are presumably going on to be the leaders of a society. We believe, however, that the claims made by scholars of popular communication create a special incentive, in addition to addressing our messages to fellow scholars, to go around these middlepersons and address the great unwashed directly. If we have news about messages that circulate in people's everyday lives, then we should be able to articulate that news directly to people and in the venues where they encounter such messages. We thus call first and foremost for scholars of popular

communication to pursue the venerable mantle of Public Intellectual, to put what we know directly before the public for their consideration. Scholars of popular communication might, for instance, get into the regular habit of submitting letters to the editor or of participating in online newsgroups or chat rooms to share what we know. At the very least, we hope scholars of popular communication will contact their institution's speakers' bureau or center for university media relations and enlist as expert; speaking to news media about current events is a modest step toward addressing wider audiences.

To share what we know with nonacademics entails an intentional commitment to accessible language—at least sometimes. One of us decries the use of mystifying language and arcane terminology in scholarship, while the other understands such jargon as an inevitable and necessary part of the theoretical enterprise (Gunn, 2004). Both of us suspect, however, that such usage is often designed to perpetuate a priesthood, an elitism, a mystery among academics. That most academics who engage in such deliberate mummery—particularly at conferences—would tell you they are all in favor of leveling power in this country, of demystifying politics, and of breaking the foundations of privilege, sometimes makes the manner in which these folks speak shameful (recently one of us witnessed a paper presentation that was full of so much mystifying terminology that it was clear only one person in the audience understood it). Although there are good reasons, and space enough, for dense, theoretical discussions that touch on the popular, insofar as we recommend scholars to deliberately address more promiscuous and popular audiences, writing and speaking in more common, less specialized vocabulary from time to time is important.

We also urge our fellow scholars of popular communication to continue to move toward an understanding of the erotic. We mean by erotic, of course, not a narrowly sexual desire but rather, any order of desire, whether it is understood in psychoanalytic terms (Freudian, Lacanian, Marcusean) or the presently more fashionable “rhizomatic” understanding of desire forwarded by Deleuze & Guattari (1996a, 1996b). If it is true that popular communication is, as we claimed above, circulated as a set of commodities central to late capitalism, then desire is the heart that drives those messages through the arteries of everyday living. Capital creates a tension of ongoing desire within the public so as to drive the overconsumption necessary to keep the current economic system afloat. Perhaps because our field remains largely article driven, the psychoanalytic lessons of remarkable books like Henry Krips's *Fetish: An Erotics of Culture* (1999) have been slow to influence communication research in popular communication—at least when compared to the research in neighboring disciplines. In concert with those scholars working on queer and feminist theory, as well as those working on analyses of the body, scholars should continue to focus on how texts of popular communication participate in the constant oscillating creation and satisfaction of desire.

Finally, in tandem with the push toward cartography and genealogy, we urge movement away from the notion of the polite text and tidy, well-worn methodologies. By polite text we mean the idea that texts are encountered individually and in their entirety, that they lie quietly while we poke them with our scholarly needles. Texts circulate in popular communication as a noisy buzz of fragments.

The paradigm for popular communication today is channel surfing, and that may be applied anywhere as a metaphor for how such texts are distributed and consumed. Studies of popular communication need to be sensitive to multiple texts, fragmented texts, and the reassembled Frankenstein's texts of everyday experience. The explosion of objects of popular communication also demands newer methods of approach. In the end, however, the methodological and conceptual structures with which we approach popular communication need to be dome-like and overarching in shape, designed to pull together the multiplicity that is today's communicative experience.

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