

## **The illusion of agency: a theoretical footnote upon notions of media interactivity, participation and co-authorship**

Alec Charles

Principal Lecturer in Media, University of Bedfordshire

alec.charles@beds.ac.uk

### **Introduction**

In discussions focused upon the political functions of new media technologies at the annual conference of the Political Studies Association's Media and Politics Group (University of Strathclyde, 5-6 November 2009), the political scientist Professor John Curtice pointed out that "people's uses of the Internet are primarily a function of their prior motivations [...] the Internet isn't bringing into political activity people who aren't engaging in it offline." His point is echoed by numerous studies of the impact of new media technologies upon political participation. Gibson et al. (2004: 3), for example, cite Scheufele and Nisbet's 2002 survey, in which "none of the modes of Internet use [...] was found to have any significant effect on individuals' proclivity to engage in politics." Oymen Gur (2010) has meanwhile suggested that, while social networking websites offer their users the illusion of personal liberation, they effectively seize control of their users' subjectivities: "the more people are liberated with wider and more transparent networks, the more they are constrained."

This paper serves as a theoretical elaboration upon analyses of the modes of interactivity, agency and participation which such new media forms appear (or purport) to offer – and specifically develops ideas advanced in studies of the uses of digital games and of electronic governance and democracy published by this author (Charles 2009a, Charles 2009b). This paper attempts to contextualize effects witnessed in the cases of those new media forms within a broader theoretical framework and within a wider mass media context.

### **Reality: television**

In May 2009 Piers Morgan, a former editor of the *Daily Mirror* and a judge on the popular talent contest *Britain's Got Talent*, described one of that programme's contestants (a Scotswoman whose unprepossessing appearance had garnered her international fame) as "the antidote to the recession." In doing so, Morgan invoked a typically mediacentric perspective upon contemporary society, one which (in the era of the spin doctor and of reality television) seems virtually unassailable.

This transformation of the material into the mass media product was of course foreseen by Jean Baudrillard (1988: 32): "Everything is destined to reappear as simulation [...] terrorism as fashion and the media, events as television. Things only seem to exist by virtue of this strange destiny. You wonder whether the world itself isn't just here to serve as advertising copy in some other world." The postmodern, post-postmodern or post-historical era appears to be witnessing a process whereby material history is increasingly subsumed to a mediated virtuality, to the reality of television, of reality television. This much has been painfully apparent since (in January 2006) British MP George Galloway (who had in 1994 and 2002 launched his own peace missions to Baghdad) appeared on *Celebrity Big Brother* – or since (in January 2007) the same show prompted the burning of effigies of one of its contestants in the Indian city of Patna – or since (in July 2007) the then Prime

Minister was obliged to comment on that programme's next race row – or since (in March 2009) the next Prime Minister led the tributes to the late *Big Brother* star (and former alleged racist) Jade Goody.

According to Jonathan Bignell (2005: 96) the British Member of Parliament Jane Griffiths contacted programme-makers Endemol in November 2003 to suggest “a House of Commons version of *Big Brother*.” It seems that Ms Griffiths (who in February 2004 became the first MP for a decade to be deselected by her own constituency party) believed that in the hearts and minds of the great British public the political significance, responsibility and privilege of parliamentary democracy had already been subsumed to the pseudo-democratic simulacra of reality television.

Bignell (2005: 130) goes on to detail a rather more disturbing instance of the confusion between reality television and historical reality – when, on 11 September 2001, the producers of the American *Big Brother* called one of the programme's housemates into the diary room to inform her (in the anonymous, invisible voice of ‘Big Brother’) that “her cousin, whose workplace was in the World Trade Center, was missing.”

On 28 May 2006 *The Observer's* television critic Andrew Anthony wrote:

Where were you when Shahbaz walked out of the *Big Brother* House? It's not quite the Kennedy assassination, I'll concede, but we can't choose the gravity of the times in which we live.

Reality television has come to replace material history; events are only and essentially media events. On 20 August 2006 Anthony added that “*Big Brother* [...] fulfils its Orwellian promise: it *is* society.” Television is the new society, a post-historical substitute for politics and democracy.

The diminishing appeal of *Big Brother* in terms of viewing figures and media coverage (which may not be unrelated factors) led the UK's Channel 4 to announce in August 2009 that it would broadcast its eleventh and final season of the show in 2010. It may simply be that the format has grown tired; but it may also be that, as the War on Terror meets global recession, at a time in which Britain's confidence in its parliamentary and governmental systems appears unprecedentedly low, UK audiences are demanding something rather more escapist – something which refuses to reflect society in all its unpalatable and caricatured detail but which in fact promotes an idealization of society – something which is overtly moderated and mediated by reassuring figures and structures of authority.

The popular British television series *The X Factor* (2004- ), for example, offers members of the public the opportunity at once to achieve fame and fortune (to win the celebrity lottery), to share the vicarious pleasure of the achievement of that fame and fortune (through identification with the contestants) and to influence the contestants' progress (through a telephone voting system – which also offers its users the chance to win tickets to join the studio audience, to participate even more closely in the show – as well as to win a life-changing cash prize). It is, as such, a traditional talent contest which also affords the modes of pleasure associated with such classics of reality television as *Big Brother*: liveness of performance and immediacy of reaction, vicarious achievement and a sense of democratic participation. Yet even this illusion of democratic participation – this mock-democracy, this democracy of insignificance and ephemera – is limited. The programme's four celebrity judges continue for the most part to have the final say: democracy only extends so far; the ultimate power continues to rest in the hands of a self-appointed elite, an oligarchy.

There is perhaps a comforting conservatism in this situation which appears to appeal to audiences excluded or alienated from more traditional (and more material) structures of social and political trust.

In the episode of 29 November 2009 *The X Factor*'s presenter Dermot O'Leary announced that, as the series had reached its quarter-final stage, the judges would no longer have the power to save acts from expulsion: "Judges, you are powerless [...] This is how normal people feel all the time." Yet, of course, the judges retain their influence: their judgments continue to inform the perspectives of the public jury. O'Leary's differentiation of the programme's judges from 'normal people' far from undermining their authority underlines it.

The results of the early weeks of audience votes in the 2009 series appear to demonstrate a number of interesting trends. During the first four weeks of these public telephone votes, four of the six acts whom the viewing public afforded the fewest votes included performers of ethnic minority (one of whom appeared three times in this least popular category in the space of a month); while only one of the six acts not to face such public disapprobation featured a non-white performer. During the first six weeks of public voting four of the six acts evicted from the show featured ethnic minority performers – while only one of the remaining six acts featured a non-white singer (who was eventually expelled in the semi-final). A similar effect was witnessed in the BBC's 2008 talent competition *I'd Do Anything*, in which the only two finalists of ethnic minority (out of a cohort of twelve) – Cleo Royer and Keisha Amponsa-Banson – were voted off in the second and fifth weeks of the series respectively. The latter faced the sing-off three times, having received the lowest number of public votes on each occasion. This situation eventually (on 27 April 2008) prompted an unprecedented outburst from chief judge Andrew Lloyd Webber: "this is a complete and utter travesty [...] for the first time on a television show, I am angry."

These voting patterns may not suggest an overt or conscious racism prevalent among the programme's audience; it may simply be that the voting members of the audience (like those in the *Eurovision Song Contest*) tend to vote along lines of ethnic identification – a position more closely aligned to jingoism than to xenophobia. This process of identification would appear to reflect the vicariousness of the pleasures the programme affords. However, the successes of Leona Lewis and Alexandra Burke in previous seasons of *The X Factor* suggest that this bias does not necessarily dominate the later stages of the series, when familiarity, quality and months of mediation may override more atavistic modes of identification.

On 25 October 2009 *The X Factor*'s presenter, as usual, announced the acts selected by the popular vote to return to sing the following week. As he did so, the camera turned to the programme's contestants, cutting from anxious face to anxious face, and a pattern slowly became apparent: in four out of eight cases (indeed in alternating cases) the name announced as reprieved from expulsion would be that of the second contestant to whom the camera had just cut in each of these short sequences. This half-pattern could not, of course, become too obvious (if it happened every time, rather than alternating times, the audience would notice); but it no doubt afforded the viewer an unconscious hint of whose name was about to be announced. The *X Factor* results shows of 18 October and 1 November 2009 offered similar patterns: in (respectively) six out of nine and six out of seven cases, the contestant to whom the camera had cut second in the sequence of anxious faces immediately prior to each announcement turned out to be the next one reprieved by the public vote. Watching this, the viewer (before becoming conscious of the pattern) may have discovered that she was successfully predicting the results at least fifty per cent of the

time. This of course adds to the viewer's pleasure, because it enhances her illusion of agency.

The success and the pleasure of the classic reality television format appears to rely on three key elements: the semblance of reality (the liveness of performance and response, the openness, normalcy and naturalness of performers' personalities, identification with those performers or contestants and the sharing of their heartbreaks and triumphs), the feeling of active participation (through telephone voting to save those contestants you like or to evict those you loathe) and a sense of the significance of the event. The last of these requires the collaboration of other media forms and outlets: *Big Brother* and *The X Factor* become significant events only insofar as tabloid newspapers, celebrity magazines, 'soft' news programmes and entertainment websites recognize and represent them as such – and also insofar as they feature increasingly within the context of more serious journalistic content. Even the nation's Prime Minister has colluded in this process. On 28 November 2008 the *Daily Telegraph* revealed that "Gordon Brown has emerged as a secret *X Factor* fan after writing personal letters to contestants from the television series." In November 2009 Brown informed *GQ* magazine that he was "an *X Factor* fan" – and a few days later told Manchester radio station Key 103 that he was not fond of one particular act on the programme, the teenaged Irish twins John and Edward Grimes (aka 'Jedward'). Brown's opinions were discussed by the programme's judges on the 7 November edition of the series, in which Simon Cowell asked fellow panellist Louis Walsh to apologize to the Prime Minister for implying that his views on the Grimes twins suggested he was out of touch with the mood of the nation. However, on 22 November 2009 the *BBC News* website reported that "Prime Minister Gordon Brown sent his best wishes to the twins after admitting he had got into trouble for having said they were 'not very good'."

Meanwhile, on 5 November 2009 *The Daily Telegraph* had reported that "the *X Factor* twins John and Edward have a new celebrity fan [...] David Cameron, the Conservative leader." The *Telegraph's* use of the term *celebrity* to describe the Conservative Party Leader is revealing in itself. This confusion of political reality with television celebrity was further emphasized when, as *The Daily Mail* reported on 13 November 2009, "a new internet poster produced by Labour spin doctors has morphed the Tory leader and shadow chancellor George Osborne with the *X Factor* twins, Jedward" – alongside the slogan 'you won't be laughing if they win'. It appears that one's loyalty to this series is an increasingly important test of one's political mettle. On 20 November 2009, when Baroness Ashton was appointed the European Union's first High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security, the *Evening Standard* noted that she was an *X Factor* fan.

It seems that this series also represents an essential point of cultural reference for activists far beyond the political mainstream. On 21 October 2008 the *Daily Telegraph* reported that "Omar Bakri, the radical Islamic cleric, sparked a terror alert after claiming *The X Factor* is 'anti Muslim' for releasing a charity single for injured British troops." In February 2006, the then U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld had announced that "in this war, some of the most critical battles may not be in the mountains of Afghanistan or the streets of Iraq but in newsrooms in New York, London, Cairo and elsewhere." While Rumsfeld's notion of the significance of the media is difficult to deny, it might be noted that his emphasis upon the news media underestimates the crucial role of the ubiquitous popular entertainment formats of reality television in the contemporary political process.

Each episode of *The X Factor* opens with a glossy title sequence in which a shining 'X' shoots across the solar system towards the Earth, zooming down upon the UK like a falling star. One is reminded in this context of the Christian nativity – or, for that matter, of the opening of Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1935) in which the Führer descends from the heavens like a Messiah. These opening titles remind us that this is a pivotal moment in the history of the world.

The reality television show announces to its audience that it offers an event which is both real (historical) and significant (historic): one in which the audience can participate both vicariously and actually. It offers its audience a remarkably effortless way to assert their subjective significance by participating actively in the historical process – to have the illusion of making history – in as much as this is precisely what history now is, insofar as this is how power (media power, which is public power) now views history. *The X Factor* advances an alternative to democracy, the enigmatic 'X' of celebrity which replaces the ostensibly obsolescent cross on the ballot sheet. On 14 December 2009 the *BBC News* website reported that:

[*X Factor* creator Simon] Cowell has designs on the next UK general election.

Not a *Politicians' X Factor*, but a series of big prime time shows leading up to the election in which the public would hear two sides of the argument about several issues.

There would, he said, be a red telephone for the politicians to ring in, a massive *X Factor*-style studio audience split for and against the issue, and live voting by the viewers.

In the run-up to the UK's general election in 2005, ITV launched a reality show called *Vote for Me*, designed to allow the public to select a candidate for Parliament. However, as *The Guardian* noted on 10 January 2005, the programme "was consigned to a graveyard 11pm slot". One suspects that if Cowell ever goes ahead with his political reality show, it will be afforded a rather more prestigious timeslot, and will allow the viewer a greater sense of the significance of the event in which they are participating, a sense that their involvement is an instance of political activism in itself. Politics is thus becoming indistinguishable from reality television. As Barack Obama commented in March 2009, "Washington is a little bit like *American Idol*, except everyone is like Simon Cowell."

While *The X Factor* offers members of the public the opportunity to transform other members of the public into celebrities, its network stablemate *I'm a Celebrity... Get Me Out of Here!* (2002-) apparently sponsors the opposite process: the possibility of diminishing the status of the celebrity, forcing them, for example, to eat insects, grubs and spiders in the programme's 'Bushtucker Trial'. Yet the pleasures generated by both series are equally quasi-egalitarian – and may similarly stand in lieu of real world egalitarian or democratic imperatives.

This participatory illusion represents the defining myth of media-democracy, the cybertopian dream that the hegemony of the media offers an interactive process of popular empowerment. Yet, in the end, is the citizen of a mass-mediated world – the mediocratic subject – an active participant in a technologically enhanced democracy or the passive dupe of a mediacentric autocracy? As Nick Couldry (2010) has suggested, reality television may increasingly be seen as becoming "a wholly unacceptable form of social management."

In December 2009 the successful Facebook campaign to ensure that the *X Factor* winner's single failed to top the UK's popular music charts at Christmas did

not, in the end, represent a resurgence of democracy so much as a consolidation of the process whereby popular action has shifted away from the realm of substantive political participation. This, then, was the extent of the triumph of the protest against globalized capitalism at the end of the week in which the Copenhagen summit on climate change failed to reach consensus upon a protocol which might adequately address an impending environmental catastrophe.

### Theories of co-authorship

In an elaboration upon his notions of hot and cool media, Marshall McLuhan (2001: 24) defines a hot medium as one which focuses upon a single sensory input. He proposes that, as a consequence of their sensory concentration, hot media are semantically saturated, and as such require and permit little in the way of audience participation (McLuhan, 2001: 24-25). By contrast, cool media (by virtue of being less focused or distilled) are more ventilated, more open to interpretation or participation. It is for this reason that McLuhan (2001: 340, 31) is able to argue, for example, that television promotes audience involvement and that “in reading a detective story the reader participates as co-author simply because so much has been left out of the narrative.”

It seems clear, however, that the detective novel does not in fact allow the reader significant opportunities for interpretation or active participation (whether in a traditional paper-based format, or indeed reimagined as a digital game – such as Nintendo DS’s 2009 adaptation of James Patterson’s murder mysteries): its clues draw its audience upon a predetermined path through its hermeneutic labyrinth. However often one reads Agatha Christie, one will never expose Hercule Poirot as the killer of Roger Ackroyd. The limits that the classic detective novel sets upon its interpretability are its author’s; it imposes closure upon its audience; its ultimate narratological function is to implode its own ambiguities.

McLuhan’s sense of a mode of textuality which invites co-authorship is very different from that advanced by Roland Barthes in his elucidation of the *scriptible* text in *S/Z* and in his celebration of ‘The Death of the Author’. Barthes (1974: 4) writes:

Our literature is characterized by the pitiless divorce which the literary institution maintains between the producer of the text and its user, between its owner and its customer, between its author and its reader. The reader is thereby plunged into a kind of idleness – he is intransitive [...] instead of gaining access to the magic of the signifier, to the pleasure of writing, he is left with no more than the poor freedom either to accept or reject the text: reading is nothing more than a *referendum*.

Barthes’s traditional readerly texts are fixed, final and finite products, rather than processes of production (Barthes 1974: 5). Their modes of reception represent referenda as passive and empty as the voting practices of *The X Factor*.

Barthes’s antithesis to the classic readerly or *lisible* text is the writerly or *scriptible* text. Barthes’s textual ideal is founded upon the premiss that the function of literature is to transform the reader from a passive consumer into an active producer of meaning (Barthes 1974: 4). The writerly text invites, embodies and requires cooperation and co-authorship: it understands that meaning is an act of interpretation rather than of intention or expression. As Barthes (1977: 148) proposes, the

intertextual polysemy of the work of art originates where it is destined to end: in the mind not of its author but of its audience.

There are, however, schools of critical thought which suggest that popular culture is necessarily *lisible*, that its essential political function is to dumb us down, and that new technologies intensify this process. Noam Chomsky (1989: 14), for example, has argued that “the media are vigilant guardians protecting privilege from the threat of public understanding and participation.” There is nothing spectacularly new in this idea: in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* Adorno and Horkheimer (1986: 120-167) complained that cinema’s homogenizing processes divested its audiences of the power of critical thought. Bertolt Brecht (1978: 187) meanwhile imagined the users of industrial culture as ideological zombies: “They scarcely communicate with each other, their relations are those of a lot of sleepers [...] their eyes are open, but they stare rather than see [...] as if in a trance [...] These people seem relieved of activity and like men to whom something is being done.”

Brecht’s image all too easily fits the stereotype of the TV addict, the online gambler or the video game junkie. Yet, rather more recently, the likes of John Fiske and Stuart Hall have argued against the absolutism of these hypodermic theories of mass-cultural influence: “I do not believe that ‘the people’ are ‘cultural dopes’; they are not a passive, helpless mass incapable of discrimination and thus at the economic, cultural and political mercy of the barons of the industry” (Fiske 1987: 309). Barthes’s *scriptibilité* anticipates Stuart Hall’s suggestion that the act of decoding a text may not be equivalent to the process of its encoding – but may encompass negotiation with, or opposition to, the dominant meanings privileged by the position of authorship.

But perhaps no texts are truly negotiable or interactive in themselves. Rather than Hall, Barthes or Fiske’s celebrations of the potential of audience co-authorship, it may be that Walter Benjamin’s ambivalence offers the most durable theoretical stance. Walter Benjamin (1992: 234) describes the mass media audience as an absent-minded examiner. He proposes that “a man who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it [but] the distracted mass absorb the work of art” (Benjamin, 1992: 232). The former state of immersion permits the survival of an integral subjectivity; the latter process incubates an ideological identity within the passive subject. We remain caught between these positions – between the liberal’s free-thinking citizen and the Marxist’s dope – or perhaps, rather, we are both (and neither) of these at the same time. We can only be the former when we believe we are the latter; when we believe we are the former, we become the latter.

If those popular texts, technologies and practices which invite audience participation (detective stories, game shows, reality television, competitions and lotteries, phone-ins, teleshopping, electronic governance, citizen journalism, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, online gambling and digital games) in fact offer only an *illusion* of interactivity, then – rather than promoting participation – they may in fact serve entrenched structures of power by sublimating our desires for active, participatory citizenship. It may be argued that the illusion of *scriptibilité* fostered by such media forms seduces the user into neglecting the modes of critical negotiation which might prevent the states of ideological assimilation envisaged by Adorno and Brecht – that the text’s demands for functional reactivity promote an illusion of agency which lulls the user into an interpretative passivity, and which thereby serves to posit its subject within a virtually invisible (and therefore virtually irresistible) ideological mould. This illusion is central to any process of textual inculcation, but these contemporary media forms reinforce it with an apparently unprecedented degree

of influence. Today's media forms are neither more nor less interactive than any other mode of textuality – yet they announce their interactivity more forcefully than any earlier form.

We might therefore add a third category to Roland Barthes's classification of *scriptible* and *lisible* texts: the *faux-scriptible* text which proclaims its openness to interactivity, which gives its user the illusion of meaning, power and active participation, and which, in appearing to satisfy its audience's desire for agency, in fact sublimates and dilutes that desire. This process resembles a kind of textual karaoke: its audiences believe that their participation represents a form of activity, a mode of agency, but they are, in effect (and in consequence), mere puppets of the text. This *faux-scriptible* text is thus significantly more reactionary and compelling than the *lisible*.

### **You've been framed**

The paradox of the bourgeois-proletarian relationship is clear enough to the classical Marxist. What has been less clear is why this exploitative relationship continues. Why has the proletariat not cast off the shackles of its exploitation? Why has the revolution simply not taken place?

The apparently collaborative suffering of the proletariat perhaps (in some absurd and inappropriate way) recalls that of the *Sonderkommando*, the Jewish volunteers who, in Auschwitz, aided in the slaughter of their own people – and of each other (for the *Sonderkommando* were not excluded from the death lists). Robert Lifton and Eric Markusen (1991: 237) explain that the duties of the *Sonderkommando* included “conducting arriving Jews, usually roughly, to the selections and then to the ‘showers’ (for the most part actively maintaining the deception).” The function of this collaboration was, for the Reich, as ideological as it was practical: it involved a confusion of the actual monstrosity of the persecuting subject with the invented monstrosity of the persecuted object, and therefore propagated a justification of sorts, a sophistic claim of mitigating circumstances (if these people can do this even to themselves, they truly deserve to die). It was as if, as Primo Levi (1989: 37) writes, the architects of genocide were announcing to their victims: “we can destroy not only your bodies but also your souls, just as we have ours.” The dehumanization of the victims – their transformation, actual or imagined, into beasts or machines incapable of human feeling – was for the Third Reich, as for Orwell's (and – to some extent – Endemol's) Big Brother, the ultimate abdication of moral commonality, and therefore of moral responsibility.

Why then do the ‘victims’ of power submit to – even or collaborate in – the processes of their own victimization? Is it (as might be said of the *Sonderkommando*) because it is psychologically less agonizing to abdicate the responsibilities of human individualism, and to participate in, to be assimilated within, to *collaborate* in, the dominant ideology, its myths and its discourse? Primo Levi has suggested that the motivation for the *Sonderkommando* appears unfathomable; yet the ability of the human race to align or subsume itself to the most prevalent ideological trends is hardly historically anomalous. After all, is not a submission to ideological conformity so very often the species' default position?

As Michel Foucault (1991: 26) points out, “power is exercised rather than possessed.” Power structurations are self-performing and self-perpetuating; societal systematization is determined not by the conspiracies of sharp-suited men in smoke-filled rooms but by the evolution of political, economic and ideological conditions. In

these terms, we are no more than the vehicles, vessels or tools of Marx's ideologies or of Richard Dawkins's memes: as Marshall McLuhan (2001: 51) supposed, "Man becomes [...] the sex organs of the machine world, as the bee of the plant world, enabling it to fecundate."

It may be suggested that the persecuted and exploited (such as the Marxian proletariat) embrace the system of exploitation because they believe that one day they will become the exploiters themselves – that one day they will win the lottery that is capitalism. Yet this theory does not in itself explain why the proletariat should believe themselves capable or deserving of such a socio-economic transfiguration.

The reason that we each think that we will one day beat the system (or, rather, win within the system) is perhaps that we have been programmed to think of ourselves in this way. In the 1990s there was a popular television commercial for Britain's national lottery in which a giant golden hand (the hand of God?) appeared from the heavens and pointed its index finger towards a person who had just bought a lottery ticket: "It could be you!" We buy lottery tickets because we believe that (against all the odds, both astronomical and divine) there is something special about ourselves which means that we will win. Perhaps we collaborate in power systems which exploit and persecute us for similar reasons. Why then do I think *it could be me*? That, said Louis Althusser, is a matter of *interpellation*.

Jacques Lacan theorized that in our pre-linguistic infancy we occupy an *imaginary* phase of development: a period of oneness with the world, with the other, with (and through) the mother: a stage of consciousness before the reflexive self-consciousness of adult subjectivity. This bliss is shattered when the infant faces the assumption of this individual subjectivity at what Lacan calls the *mirror-stage* – and is then propelled headlong into the adult world of the symbolic order, complete with all the trappings, threats and laws of patriarchy: "the *mirror-stage* is a drama [...] which manufactures [...] the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image [...] to the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity" (Lacan 1980: 2-4). Thereafter, says Lacan, our conscious desires are merely substitutes – *objets petits autres* – for the one true desire: the return to the imaginary stage, a half-remembered time of our lives that preceded the alienation of adulthood. For Louis Althusser, the appendages of the ideological state apparatus hail us once again with the promise of a restoration of Lacan's imaginary state of being. Mass culture calls to us, it announces to us that our lives are meaningful, that we are (like the infant in the bliss of the imaginary) each of us at the centre of the universe. It is only this belief which allows us to serve the state as sane, submissive citizens. We recognize ourselves in our heroes, and therefore dream of our own meaningfulness. Just as Clarence the angel creates for James Stewart a fantasy of individual meaningfulness in Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life*, so the process of interpellation posits the passive individual as an active subject: the individual is *interpellated*, and, as this process is never without an ideological destination, the subject is assimilated within the dominant structure of power. "Ideology," writes Althusser (2006: 118), "recruits" subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or 'transforms' individuals into subjects (it transforms them all)."

When we are told we are active, participatory, powerful individuals, we no longer struggle to become so. W.H. Auden (1979: 81) suggested that "each in the cell of himself is almost convinced of his freedom" – yet when each individual is not *almost* but *absolutely* convinced by that illusion of self-determination, those who are interpellated by the dictatorship of the mass media will not even dream of autonomy and liberation, because (like all those sustained by the *faux-scriptible*, like the victims

of *The Matrix* itself) they will mistakenly believe that they are already the authors of their own destinies.

In November 2009 LG Electronics launched an advertising campaign for its range of LED televisions which announced that “the day we are born is the last day we are truly free” – but suggested that its “seamless entertainment” hardware could somehow deliver us from this existential trap. As *Marketing Direct* noted on 30 October 2009, the commercial suggests that “we are ‘boxed in’ by life and jobs. With wireless technologies, the ads claim we can be ‘free’ again.” This notion of (pre-) infantile freedom offers a release from the ties that bind us into the symbolic order – offers a return, then, to the Lacanian imaginary. Contemporary popular media interpellate their audience by denying their ideological construction, by disguising their devices within the illusion of seamlessness, the invisibility of their own suture. Silverman (1984: 214) reminds us that media “suture is [...] largely synonymous with the operations of classic narrative.” This, then, despite all its claims of interactivity, personalization and liberation, is a process of classic, *lisible* realism, one which, in Fiske’s terms, has developed “in order to disguise the ‘constructedness’ of the reality it offers, and therefore the arbitrariness of the ideology that is mapped onto it” (1987: 36).

A 2010 recruitment commercial for the Royal Navy follows the structure of the LG Electronics advertisement: “You’re born, you cry....” Like the commercial for LED television sets, the Royal Navy offers itself as a release from the trap of mundane existence: its alternative is “a life without limits”. It seems pertinent that these two apparently very different concerns (television manufacturing and the armed forces) should employ remarkably similar modes of promotion or recruitment, insofar as the media and the military participate in parallel strategies of interpellation in order to sponsor and sustain precisely the same structurings of power.

This is why the revolution will not be televised: because the interpellative processes of television negate the very possibility of revolution. Marshall McLuhan (2001: 340, 366) wrote that the “TV medium [...] creates audience involvement” and that “the TV child expects involvement [...] want[s] a *role* and a deep commitment to his society.” But is the opposite not in fact the case: that, insofar as the medium of television promotes the *illusion* (rather than the actuality) of involvement, it in fact undermines the possibility of social, civil and democratic participation? The revolution will not be televised, because the televisualisation and television of reality (its conversion into and dissemination as television) involves the very negation of popular political activity or participation. The illusion of interactivity satisfies (and therefore diminishes) our desire for participation and subjectivity: because we believe we are active participants, we no longer try to be so; because we believe we are self-determining subjects, we allow ourselves to be transformed into ideological objects. In this context it appears that the mass media’s much-vaunted role as the mediator between people and power may in fact disguise quite the opposite function, and that the more the media announce their potential for interactivity and dialogism, the more monological and hegemonic they may be allowed invisibly to become.

## References

Adorno, T., and Horkheimer, M. (1979). *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (trans. Cumming, J.). London: Verso.

Althusser, L. (2006). *Lenin and Philosophy* (trans. Brewster, B.). Delhi: Aakar Books.

- Auden, W.H. (1979). 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats' in *Selected Poems*. London: Faber & Faber, 80-83.
- Barthes, R. (1975). *S/Z* (trans. Miller, R.). New York: Farrar.
- Barthes, R. (1977). *Image-Music-Text* (trans. Heath, S.). London: Fontana.
- Baudrillard, J. (1988). *America* (trans. Turner, C.). London: Verso.
- Benjamin, W. (1992). *Illuminations* (trans. Zohn, H.). London: Fontana Press.
- Bignell, J. (2005). *Big Brother: Reality TV in the Twenty-First Century*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Brecht, B. (1978). *Brecht on Theatre* (trans. Willett, J.). London: Methuen.
- Charles, A. (2009a). 'Playing with one's self: notions of subjectivity and agency in digital games' in *Eludamos: Journal for Computer Game Culture* 3:2, 281-294.
- Charles, A. (2009b). 'The electronic state: Estonia's new media revolution' in *Journal of Contemporary European Research* 5:1, 97-113.
- Chomsky, N. (1989). *Necessary Illusions*. London: Pluto Press.
- Couldry, N. (2010). 'Voice that Matters', paper presented at the *Media, Communication and Cultural Studies Association Conference*, London School of Economics, 6-8 January 2010.
- Dawkins, R. (1976). *The Selfish Gene*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fiske, J. (1987). *Television Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Foucault, M. (1991). *Discipline and Punish* (trans. Sheridan, A.). Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Gibson, R., Lusoli, W., Römmele, A. and Ward, S. (2004). 'Representative democracy and the Internet' in Gibson, R., Römmele, A., and Ward, S. (eds), *Electronic Democracy*. Abingdon: Routledge, 1-16.
- Gur, O. (2010). 'Comparing social network sites and past social systems', paper presented at the *Media, Communication and Cultural Studies Association Conference*, London School of Economics, 6-8 January 2010.
- Hall, S. (1980). 'Encoding/Decoding' in Hobson, D., Lowe, A., and Willis, P. (eds), *Culture, Media, Language*. London: Hutchinson, 128-138.
- Jameson, F. (1991). *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. London: Verso.

Lacan, J. (1980). *Ecrits*. London: Tavistock.

Levi, P. (1989). *The Drowned and the Saved* (trans. Rosenthal, R.). London: Abacus.

Lifton, R., and Markusen, E. (1991). *The Genocidal Mentality*. London: Macmillan.

McLuhan, M. (2001). *Understanding Media*. London: Routledge.

Orwell, G. (1954). *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Silverman, K. (1984). *The Subject of Semiotics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.