

## *On the democratisation of television*

### *A critical pedagogical perspective on TV*

I am no TV insider. I have never made a television programme in my life. But, I have watched a few! I come to this debate, then, as an industry outsider, yes, but as a seasoned viewer and, moreover, as someone rejecting the role of the passive consumer expected of me within the current system of television production.

What I bring to the debate, above all, are the perspective and objectives of critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy begins with the assertion that there is no such thing as politically neutral education. Education serves either to reinforce or to challenge dominant systems of power. Consequently, the political goals of critical pedagogues are explicit: the democratisation of all institutions of learning in order to empower, and cultivate the intellectuality and creativity of, all human beings. The democratisation of education is both the objective and the practical method of critical pedagogy. This means that critical pedagogues are involved in actively reimagining and creating alternative organisations and practices for learning. But, it is not just within those those institutions most directly involved in education – nurseries, schools, universities – that we are inculcated into dominant ways of thinking and being. All institutions produce knowledge and culture. Consequently, we can and must equally apply a critical pedagogical philosophy and practice to systems of cultural production: Just as there is no such thing as politically neutral education, there are no such things as politically neutral media or popular culture.

For too long, it has been the domain of cultural theorists to critique the political function of the media. They have produced some invaluable powerful analyses of contemporary hierarchical and authoritarian systems of cultural production. However, the point is not just to critique reality, but to change it. We should apply the theories, principles, and *practices* of critical pedagogy to cultural institutions with the aim of recreating them in democratic forms.

For half a century, television has arguably performed the most crucial function in constructing our personal and collective identities and ideologies. Those committed to the democratisation of our society must consider what role television might play in cultivating and sustaining democracy. To frame this question as an issue of mere representation would be a superficial approach. More fundamentally, we must concern ourselves with the democratisation of both the *ownership* of media entities and the *production and consumption* of media output. In what follows, I focus on the democratisation of the production and consumption of television - a process that involves the blurring of the boundaries between producer and viewer. Inspired by critical pedagogy, I offer five ideas for democratising television.

### *Five ideas for democratising television*

#### *(1) Breaking down boundaries between television's producers and consumers*

Fundamental to the democratisation of television is the democratisation of the means of its cultural production. Democratising the production of a TV programme would require a practice of giving voice, ensuring that the objects of our documentaries or dramas become active, speaking subjects. Ultimately, however, the camera itself must be handed over. The universal male, straight, bourgeois gaze must be joined by a multiverse of gazes: female, queer, black, disabled.

We must also pursue the democratisation of our consumption – our viewing – of television, ending the paternalistic and manipulative concepts of the passive spectator that shape current television production. Here, a cornerstone of critical pedagogical thought is essential. Jacques Ranciere's 'equality of intelligences' is a pedagogical universalism: 'I learn everything the same way - translate

signs into other signs and proceed by comparisons and illustrations in order to communicate and understand'. As viewers, we actively make sense of what we experience in just the same ways as we do in our daily lives. Any democratisation of television must recognise the active intellectuality and emancipatory potential of the viewer. A more direct way of putting this might be to endorse David Simon's maxim of 'F\*ck the average viewer'!

### *(2) Creating dissensus*

The transfer of cultural productive power generates a plethora of voices and perspectives. It is now that the possibility for producing television capable of creating 'dissensus' emerges. The concept of dissensus comes, once more, from the philosophy of Jacques Ranciere. What we understand as politics Ranciere sees as a relentlessly policed consensus. Creating dissensus means disrupting our sensibilities of our naturalised social order so that we recognise its artifice and contingency. Other realities, other worlds suddenly become conceivable. It is this experience that is necessary for us to begin to remake ourselves and our society.

### *(3) Empathy for disorientation*

Dissensus does not just disrupt what we see and believe, it disturbs our very subjectivities and identities. Dissensual culture creates the antithesis of what Theodor Adorno described as the 'feeling [of being] on safe ground' and the 'infantile need for protection' that our current mainstream 'culture industry' generates. Dissensus also reintroduces the personal and social conflict that television's production of reality sweeps away or constructs and smoothly resolves. Consequently, initial responses to dissensus can include feelings of denial and anger. Producers of democratic television need to be empathetic toward this experience of cognitive dissonance or disorientation. We need to work with psychologists, psychoanalysts, and critical pedagogues to explore strategies for helping individuals, communities, and even whole societies convert feelings of initial disorientation into positive energy for transformation.

### *(4) Theoretical glasses*

Probably only artistic interventions can create a dissensus capable of provoking initial emotional response strong enough to open up transformational possibilities. Yet, the fact that dissensus can help us see our world anew makes the role of social theory vital. The word 'theory' comes from the Greek 'theoria' meaning 'to see', 'to behold'. Producers of democratic television should invite viewers to use social theory to analyse the films and the issues they raise.

We can understand our own ideological perspective as the particular pair of glasses we wear to see the world. Transformation involves changing our proscriptio, enabling ourselves to see further and deeper. Critical pedagogy as a radical democratic philosophy is committed to self-driven transformation. We must avoid what Pierre Bourdieu rightly called the 'paternalistic-pedagogical' television of the pre-neoliberal era. To quote Bourdieu, we might regularly ask ourselves: 'Am I seeking to get people to see what I see or am I trying to help people to see for themselves?'

### *(5) Harnessing the emancipatory potential of the website*

It is the internet that provides exciting technological solutions to the challenges of democratising television. We can build websites to facilitate and encourage online and real life dialogue – safe spaces for people to share their thoughts, feelings, and ideas; to help viewers use social theory to analyse the issues raised by our films; and to help viewers come together to join existing or create new social initiatives. The pedagogical website can also liberate the film from any direct need to

be overtly didactic. In short, the combination of critical pedagogy, television, and the website has vast emancipatory potential. It can form the pedagogical bridge connecting art and emotion with critical reason, leading on to action and transformation.

These five ideas constitute ethical, practicable principles for transforming the way television is produced and viewed. The barriers to creating television according to these ideas are not technical; they are political.

### *Conclusion*

I am an industry outsider, but I fully understand that my proposals constitute the very antithesis of the way television is currently made. It is for this reason that I think it would probably be an outsider like me to propose ideas like these. However politically radical or progressive one believes oneself to be, it is extremely hard to resist becoming institutionalised after several years of daily work within any organisation or system. Institutionalisation entails the circumscribing of our imaginations.

It was Albert Einstein who famously argued that 'we cannot hope to solve problems with the same methods we used to create them'. An outsider's perspective may well be essential to radical re-imaginings. Yet, it needs to be combined with the expertise and experience of seasoned insiders. Ultimately, what I propose is a democratisation of practice. This involves a transformation of both content and form, yet, at the heart of what I propose remains those timeless qualities of art and culture – narrative, aesthetic, emotion.

The conversation about the nature of democratic television, just like the conversation about the nature of democratic politics itself, should not be limited to a liberal advocacy for representation. Beyond representation, is a more radical democratic agenda that demands and proposes the democratisation of both the ownership and production and television. The political consequences of such a democratisation would be profound. This is why they are inevitably to be opposed, marginalised, or, ideally, silenced. However, in the context of an internet era that is dramatically opening up access to the means of cultural production, it may be that the current model of television ownership, production, and distribution can ultimately no longer resist these forces for decentralisation. This point should not be exaggerated. The TV industry remains of central political significance; its ownership structure remains oligopolistic; and access to the production of mainstream television remains a bastion of social privilege and political power. The democratisation of television cannot be left to the outcome of supposed organic techno-social processes. It will only be achieved through the pursuit of conscious political strategies. In this submission, I offer ideas which can serve as the ethical and practical guidelines for such strategies.