



The ambivalent consequences of visibility: Crime and prisons in the mass media

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Abstract

This article aims to demonstrate that, despite their potential for cultivating communitarianism and deliberative democracy on a large scale, the mass media contribute decisively to the formation of punitiveness amongst the public by means of selective semiotic aestheticisation. They overstate the problem of crime; put the blame on marginalised cohorts and level heavy criticism against the administration of prisons purportedly for laxity; issue urgent calls for ever-greater reliance on the use of strict imprisonment by the authorities and the adoption of self-policing measures by local communities and private individuals; and either mute or neutralise the attendant hardships prisoners suffer at the hands of the state. Breaking with discourses of rational linearity, whereby distorted perceptions of criminal danger result in punitive reactions, the claim is made that the imagery of crime and punishment helps audiences resolve at the level of symbolic expression contradictions which remain unconsciously insoluble at the level of everyday life.

Keywords

crime; prisons; semiotic aestheticisation; the unconscious; visibility

Bauman contends that, by dint of its capacity for sustained incapacitation and exclusion, the prison makes an appealing triple promise: to render our streets safe again, to allow for ontological fulfilment by restoring our freedom of movement, and to avenge in kind the immobilisation we have suffered heretofore. This may be true so far as it goes, but one can no longer subscribe to Bauman's consequential claim that prisoners are sent to serve their sentences in far-flung 'spaces out of sight and out of touch – spaces they cannot escape' (Bauman, 2000: 39). Whilst, in other words, confinement is accurately said to paralyse and evict deviant cohorts for lengthy periods of time, prisons and prisoners are truly not so inconspicuous to, and remote from, mainstream society as Bauman asserts. Aligning with some of Bauman's own tenets of modernity and post-modernity

(see, e.g., Bauman, 1997, 2002), the present article qualifies his account of imprisonment in two closely intertwined ways.

It is suggested that, owing to the development of the communication media, the prison world currently enjoys far greater visibility than ever before. Yet, rather than fulfilling any pedagogic or 'civilising' functions, the mediated visibility of the prison couples with that of crime to naturalise, moralise and perpetuate the physical marginalisation of convict populations. The danger of criminal victimisation is gravely exaggerated, socially weak groups are constructed as prime targets for punitive intervention from state agencies, local communities and private individuals, the prison system comes under severe criticism purportedly for coddling hardened criminals, panics are raised over the need for more and harsher imprisonment, whilst the imagery of human suffering so caused is either blocked or neutralised. To appreciate the appeal and popularity of the emerging continuum of mediation, both in terms of content and semiotics, a break is made with discourses premised on grounds of rationality alone. A conscious belief in the principles of deterrence and proportionality, for example, falls short of illuminating the incessant desire to confront horror in mediatised accounts, the more so since such accounts do not reflect empirical reality. The imagery of crime and punishment, it is argued instead, allows audiences to project unconsciously the guilt and insecurities of everyday life onto weak minorities of strangers.¹

A note of clarification on method is due before proceeding. The analysis that follows is ideal-typical in that it reconstructs the essence, essential similarities and causal interconnections of the phenomena at issue in a form with greater internal coherence than may be covered by criteria of empirical truth. For instance, little reference is made to the complexities surrounding the producer-consumer dynamic: the divergent goals and respective modes of media production, the polysemy of media texts, the idiosyncracies of audience members, and the particular sociocultural settings and institutional arrangements within which media messages and the public meet and mesh (see further, Jewkes, 2006: 145–7; Banks, 2005; Marlière, 2000). In addition to its convenience for reasons of space, this abstractionist account aims to provide a replenished set of heuristic yardsticks in comparison to which future inquiry can be undertaken, whilst at the same time exhorting the reader to be vigilant about the possible latent functions of mass-mediated images of crime, criminals and penal institutions. It will also identify and highlight some of the areas – situational, substantive and stylistic – where the need for infusing the public and penal policy debates with the craft and science of critical criminology appears to be most urgent.

WHAT COULD HAVE BEEN

Thanks to the mass media, visibility acquires what Thompson (2005) terms a 'de-spatialised' dimension. Namely, the field of vision is no longer constrained by the spatial and temporal properties of the here and now, but is rather shaped by the distinctive properties of communication media (see further, Brighenti, 2007). It is on this ethereal level that the included majority interacts and familiarises itself with excluded

minorities. In its fully fledged form, mass communication flows in both directions. Just as marginalised groups receive messages from all over the world, so too the broader community is exposed to messages from audiences kept at a geographical distance. No sphere of social interaction is immune, not even that between the free community and the prison. As Meyrowitz puts the point, 'the walls of the mightiest fortress no longer define a truly segregated social setting if a camera, a microphone, or even a telephone is present' (Meyrowitz, 1985: viii).

This is not to be confused with a transcendental variant of sociability, that is, with vacuous and therefore anodyne forms of social interaction 'where the heavily freighted forces of reality are felt only as from a distance, their weight fleeting in a charm' (Simmel, 1949: 261). The mediated overlapping between distant (or close but bounded) locales and the wider society may be said to exert an immense and lasting impact on the attitudes of lay publics. No value judgement is implied here. As is the case with all media (in the lexical sense, that of agency by which something is accomplished), the mass media resemble a double-edged sword. They can be used and abused, they can be empowering as well as disempowering, they can be an instrument of direct democracy as much as a subtle means of symbolic manipulation and oppression. 'Media, like walls and windows, can hide and they can reveal. Media can create a sense of sharing and belonging or a feeling of exclusion and isolation. Media can reinforce a "them vs. us" feeling or they can undermine it' (Meyrowitz, 1985: 7).

At the positive end of the equation, one may speak of authentic sociability or 'communitarianism', whereby individuals are introduced to broad communities of fellow media consumers. In this case, it is not the message that counts as the purpose of mediated experience, but the euphoric activity of sharing the 'global village' created by the sheer force of reiteration (McLuhan and Fiore, 1967). In the content-dependent version of the 'global village' thesis, the mediated sharing of information and lifestyle options may serve progressively to weaken traditional group ties and the social conflicts such ties tend to produce or inflame. Thus, Castells points to the rising amalgamation of cultural impulses from across the globe: from the rap culture of American ghettos, as it was mimicked in the pop groups of Taipei or Tokyo, to Buddhist spiritualism transformed in electronic music (Castells, 1996; see further, Franko Aas, 2007). Within the social groupings so formed, and contrary to what happens in typical face-to-face forms of casual interaction, people already share much in common and relationships stand a better chance of lasting beyond the initial encounter (Meyrowitz, 1985).

Idyllic as 'global villages' may appear on the surface, however, they always presuppose subordination to invisible authorities. Hence, Debord writes that 'villages, unlike towns, have always been ruled by conformism, isolation, petty surveillance and boredom' (Debord, 1988/1998: 33; cited by Morreale, 2006). In return for conformity, 'villagers' are offered identical living spaces, and have all of their needs – from food and clothing to entertainment – standardised. It is this 'fragile perfection' that they defend, not the right to difference. Villagers have thus 'dispensed with that disturbing conception, which was dominant for over two hundred years, in which a society was open to criticism or transformation, reform or revolution. Not thanks to any new arguments, but simply because all arguments have ceased' (Debord, 1988/1998: 21). The question,

as Chouliaraki (2006) puts it, becomes how to move beyond sensuous delight and develop a reflexive understanding regarding distant 'others'. Insofar as the end goal is to promote ethical action, the question is how to put *technological* immediacy at the service of *sociocultural* immediacy in a way that a sense of responsibility towards the distant 'other' is engendered and sustained. Here the content and texture of mediation – the 'what' is being represented and the 'how' – take on a deeper meaning.

The highly sensationalised discourse of a 'universal' humanity hardly suffices as the means, Chouliaraki explains *ex negativo*. By virtue of its exclusive reliance on sensationalism, such discourse does very little to raise, let alone answer, the questions of why and what to do to eradicate sociospatial divisions. It rather reinforces narcissistic sensibilities and practices, either by presuming that the included already possess a kind-heartedness in wait only for specific directions, or by framing 'others' as human only insofar as their stories reflect our own emotional world (see, e.g., Tomlinson, 1999). Recall Vetlesen's philosophical point that true empathy 'arises because your pain is yours and not mine, because we are separate individual human beings' (Vetlesen, 1994: 207). Or recall the empirical observation Gatrell makes in his historical account of public execution in England: 'the need to *deny* what was involved in hanging – the choking, the kicking, the witnessed pain – intensified as it became more difficult *not* to think about the process in personalised and immanently sympathetic terms' (Gatrell, 1994: 261). Instead of emanating from principle or a higher motive, Gatrell goes on to argue, humanitarianism based in feeling is no more than a cowardly avoidance of painful realities. At best, it "[becomes] convention" and [is] subsumed reflexively within the codes of bourgeois decorum, often in alliance with evangelical earnestness' (1994: 240).

Speaking *ex positivo*, the capacities of people to become public figures and connect to distant 'others' depend on those technologies of the self that tap into their reflexivity in the sense of contemplation. For mediation to perform this pedagogical function, it must combine the emphasis on emotion with an element of impersonality. The former facilitates the spectators' capacity to 'connect', whilst the latter interrupts rather than reproduces their narcissism. Impersonality entails the use of deliberative genres of the media in ways that foreground the distinction between the spectacle and authentic reality, between hypermediacy and immediacy, between the act of watching and the appreciation of the need to undertake ethical action. Impersonality offers us 'a temporality of detached watching and reflection as if [we] were part of a public stage – an agora' (Chouliaraki, 2006: 213; see also Carrabine, 2010, forthcoming; Chouliaraki, 2010; Nussbaum, 1992; Wilkinson, 2005).² In an agora-like environment, 'groups that were highly admired may lose some of their luster from the exposure of the "ordinariness" of their members', whilst 'groups that were hated or feared ... may seem less dangerous and evil – because their members seem more human' (Meyrowitz, 1985: 136); intuitively more human than romantic personifications of 'noble savages', one should add (see further, Cheliotis, 2010a).³

Come what may, one should take care not to infer that mass communication has turned moral qualms and the extension of reflexive identification into the normal currency of majoritarian attitudes towards social inferiors and enemies, let alone that

it has invariably instigated welfare and human rights reforms. The remainder of this article focuses on crime and prisons to demonstrate how mediated familiarity with distant others may turn into a synonym for alienation, thereby forging and reinforcing cognitive classifications and respective practices of sociospatial exclusion – the very phenomena which mediation is called upon to resolve.

THE OMNIPOTENT OMNIPRESENCE OF IMPOTENCE

Television news broadcasts, infotainment programmes, talkback commentaries, films, reality shows, internet blogs, radiocasts, daily tabloids and magazine articles – the array of ‘factual’ and fictional media sources that bring the insular microcosms of crime and criminal justice into the privacy of our safe and comfortable living rooms is today wider than ever. Richness of information, however, is not necessarily tantamount to richness of knowledge (Sherizen, 1978). The content and aesthetic quality of representation matter at least as much as frequency.

With little exception, and in stark contrast to official statistics or victim surveys, the media tell us a scary story of huge increases in crime rates, also focusing overwhelmingly on violent and interpersonal offences (e.g., robbery and rape). Not dissimilarly, representations of victimisation risks are both quantitatively and qualitatively prone to sensationalisation and distortion. Whilst, for example, the heavy emphasis on ‘street’ crime is hardly reflective of the officially recorded pattern, ‘white collar’ and ‘corporate’ crimes are covered only when qualifying as ‘big bang’ events (e.g., the Enron scandal; see Jewkes, 2004). According to Box, the market value of public preference for immediacy over complexity is the driving force here. ‘The public understands more easily what it means for an old lady to have £5 snatched from her purse than to grasp the financial significance of corporate crime’, he explains (Box, 1983: 31).

Rafter (2000) helps take our understanding of the *mise-en-scène* one step further when she speaks of a ‘double movement’, from dramas of justice violated to dramas of justice undergoing restoration (see also King and Maruna, 2006; Young, 1996). Prerequisite to the latter is that protagonists in the former are identifiable individuals or groups weak enough to be controllable (see further, Hollway and Jefferson, 1997). This, then, is an additional reason why the media choose to focus on ‘street crime’ and not on ‘white collar’ and ‘corporate crime’. Shady tycoons and financiers are ‘likely to be treated with kid-gloves rather than boxing-gloves’ (Sampson, 2004: 243–4), whereas poor young black males are demonised and punished as perpetrators of violent offences, when, in fact, they themselves are most likely to fall victim to violent attack (Reiner, 2002).

To the extent that mediatised accounts fail to correspond to the daily experience of crime and the need for punishment on the ground of rationality, the immediate question revolves around the reasons why they enjoy great popularity (Beckett and Sasson, 2000; Sparks, 1992). In lieu of a comprehensive account of alternatives, it is worth dwelling on the image of the ruthless young black male mugging the fragile old woman – and here one should almost always add, the *white* old woman – from Garland’s suggested

psychoanalytic viewpoint. Elaborating on the Freudian theme of 'criminals from a sense of guilt' (Freud, 1915/1916), Garland invites us to explore the possibility of 'punishers from a sense of guilt'. 'An unconscious punitive attitude towards one's own anti-social wishes', he writes, 'may carry over into a projected punitive attitude towards those who have actually acted out such prohibited desires' (Garland, 1990: 240). For the root of our desires lies in culture, Garland goes on to argue, 'the most vehement punishments are reserved for those guilty ... [in] precisely those areas in which mainstream social and cultural norms have undergone greatest change and where middle-class ambivalence and guilt are at their most intense' (Garland, 2001: 195–6).

Such an area is the family, particularly the treatment of the elderly.⁴ No longer as tight-knit as half a century ago, families increasingly view the elderly as impediments or burdens (Logue, 1993), often forcing them to move out or disposing of them in faraway nursing clinics (Scheper-Hughes, 2002). At the same time as enacting or re-enacting our very own hostile desires, one might thus surmise, the mugging of the old woman brings to surface the hitherto suppressed emotion of guilt. Punishment, in this context, acquires a dual psychic defensive function. One is the 'splitting of the ego', whereby the reprehensible aggressive impulse and the attendant sense of guilt are projected onto remote external objects. This is not to say that the process of projection is fully realisable as such. Rose (1993), for example, points to the ever-present risk of identification between archetypal opposites (see further, Valier, 2000; Matravers and Maruna, 2004), not to mention the possibility of guilt due to 'bystander passivity' vis-à-vis the mediated personification of the suffering parent imago (on 'bystander passivity', see Cohen, 2001: 214–16). But punishment – and this is the second subtle 'coping' function it fulfils – may well reverse the sense of guilt into a narcissistic pretension of 'care'. Old women, and by extension our parents, may now feel safe enough to go shopping, although many amongst us will still mutter in frustration as they block our paths on their way. Meanwhile, in a 'correctional institution' down the road, muggers receive the punitive paternalistic treatment they have always lacked (see further Wacquant, 2001).

Such unconscious gains account for the compulsive desire to experience and re-experience crime and punishment in mediatised accounts. What is presupposed here is that the media frame crime through the lens of individual and group pathologies, and thereby divert attention away from such structural crises as deindustrialisation, economic deregulation and the collapse of the welfare state. It is not simply that structural crises are what usually triggers crime – for example, as a utilitarian means to deal with economic ills (Callanan, 2005) or an ontological attempt to take control of one's own destiny (Ferrell and Sanders, 1995; Fenwick and Hayward, 2000; Melossi, 2000). Insofar as the crises in question may be attributed to media consumers (e.g., for they elected neoliberal governments and opted for the market state; see further Garland, 2001: 156–7), silencing the former serves to eradicate the guilt of the latter for contributing to the perceived problem of crime. At the same time, the inherent artificiality of media exposure to crime helps neutralise the incipient sense of personal danger, without preventing evocation of it as real and grave. This is because people are afforded the dual experience of 'suffering "as if" they were *present*' to the horrifying instance and

'detachment by virtue of their real *absence* from the scene itself' (Kearney, 2003: 133; original emphasis).

What follows in response is not to be construed solely in the sense of transference, whereby the majority participates symbolically in the punitive wars waged by the state against the Other, but also in the dual sense of vigilance and vigilantism. As well as telling us how to think and feel, the media dictate the way in which we should conduct ourselves. Witness how the *Sunday Times*, not your usual tabloid, deploys the ethological discourse of territoriality to urge the expansion of collective natural surveillance:

Time and again it has been shown that when the people make a definite decision to take back their communities, there is little room for hoodlums. The concept behind the neighbourhood watch schemes is based on this very principle. But for the principle to work, it requires a concerted and determined effort from all members of a community to agree to take on the challenge and come to the defence of another who is under attack. Street by street, neighbourhood by neighbourhood and town by town, we can claim back our communities. (Sunday Times, 27 April 2003)

Worse still, as Evans (2003) shows in her analysis of so-called 'Residents Against Paedophiles' in Portsmouth, England, the media may play a major role in inciting a 'vigilante state of mind'. Following the murder of Sarah Payne, Evans explains, the tabloid *News of the World* launched a 'name and shame' campaign for the importation of Megan's Law from the US. Largely as a result of this, protesters marched, waved banners, torched cars and firebombed flats where suspected paedophiles were thought to reside, whilst innocent members of the community were forced to flee. Interestingly, Evans reports that many of the female protesters felt their own parental adequacy was being questioned by a political establishment content to blame single mothers for the problems of deviant youth.

All the while, whether by the moral authority of candid reporting or in the name of infotainment, the media are quick to penetrate and debunk the inner world of criminal justice agencies. Here, too, imagination tends to be taken on a sensorial journey into spaces where the false and the fictional arise victorious from the ashes of the real. Prisons are most usually typecast either as dark institutions of perpetual horror and virulent vandalism or idyllic holiday camps offering in-cell television and gourmet cuisine on the back of taxpayers. Prisoners, for their part, are portrayed as degenerate beasts beyond redemption or undeserving layabouts (Jewkes, 2007; Carrabine, 2010, forthcoming). American prison drama *Oz*, for instance, 'presents a vision of hell on earth in which inmates are so depraved and vicious that no sane person could possibly think they should ever again be let loose upon society' (Rapping, 2003: 81; see also Mason, 2003; Jarvis, 2006). But prison workers, as Freeman (1998) argues, appear in the media as generally prone to good-hearted decisions that put public security at risk.

One may call the emerging paradox 'the omnipotent omnipresence of impotence'. Rather than undermining the external legitimacy of prisons, and despite endangering professional careers, media representations reinforce public perceptions of the overall essentialness of the prison institution and of the essentialness of its further growth and harshening. Panopticism, the situation where the few see the many, owes its existence

and ascendancy to its very mirror image that is synopticism, an equally malleable situation where the many see and contemplate the few (Mathiesen, 1997: 219). It is not just that prisoner misrepresentations serve subtly to sanction and naturalise our cultural aversions and hawkish reactions to Otherness (see, e.g., Greer and Jewkes, 2005; Melossi, 2000; Nellis, 2006). Whilst corruption, racism and other forms of professional deviance are typically set within a 'one-bad-apple' framework, 'whereby the exposure of individual wrongdoing is interpreted as a testimony to the integrity of the system which dealt with it' (Reiner, 2002: 387), institutional disorder, laxity in prison administration and discretionary failings associated with high-profile cases of reoffending are all slanted as consequences of unwarranted experimentation with dangerous breeds of liberalism.

But insofar as condemnations and punishments do not follow logically from crime and deviance, they do not intrinsically embody aspirations for a crime-free society and perfectly orderly prisons. To put the point differently, the unconscious functions of punishment may only be served so long as there is a continuous supply of 'suitable enemies'. Though no politician worth his salt would ever risk making such promise, science fiction films provide audiences with reassurance: 'prisons of the future will be hellish places, and ... there will surely be villains bad enough to justify their existence' (Nellis, 2006: 223).

NO SYMPATHY FOR THE DEVIL (UNLESS SHE WEARS PRADA)

What of sympathy towards prisoners and their lot? Has it been precluded by safety concerns, righteous furore and vindictive sentiments? Or is it that we tend to discard messages that challenge the political correctness of our actions and inactions (Surette, 1998)? Is it perhaps that the authenticity of distant realities is subject to doubt when brought to us by the media (Chouliaraki, 2006)? Could it be instead that reflecting the theatricalised condition of suffering in the mirror of our own psychological portraits is bound to confine agency 'in the gasp or the shedding of a tear, bringing the possibility of action at a distance to a stop' (Chouliaraki, 2006: 210)? Or is it that repeated exposure to maladies wearies us emotionally and desensitises us morally (Cohen, 2001)? Or is it simply that we feel practically unable to lend a hand of help to distant sufferers (Tester, 2001)?

Paradoxically, adopting any of the accounts above would be unduly optimistic in that they presume an adequate degree of reciprocity of virtual vision. Not that visibility and visibility alone would suffice to incite empathic emotions and sympathetic interventions (for pertinent discussions see, amongst others, Nellis, 1988; Wilson and O'Sullivan, 2005; Cheliotis, 2010b). But how is it possible to charge the public with denial, indifference or righteous acceptance of prisoners' hardships, when access to those hardships tends to be restricted to occasional televised snapshots or single-column bulletins tucked away in the inside pages of a 'lefty' newspaper? Death row in the US, for example, is a place "'outside of life and death": a spectral place where

prisoners wait invisibly until they reappear in the announcement of their execution on the nightly news' (Tessler, 2010: 130). Turning to the act of judicial killing itself, in the same way that 'the distancing of the executioners from their victims has been facilitated at the scene of the execution by the erection of a brick wall which separates the condemned from the technicians, and permits the fatal dose to be administered through a tiny opening in the wall', the televisual sublimation of suffering reflects the formal properties of punitive action: 'its privatisation, its sanitisation and the careful denial of its own violence' (Garland, 1990: 244–5). If not equated with merciful euthanasia, mass-mediated judicial killing at least carries no obvious vindictive weight. One way or another, the narcissistic binary between the 'civilised and the savage' is further reaffirmed (Sarat, 2002: 82; see also Greer, 2006).

Lest reverie, faulty memory, or a short attention span still lead one astray, here is another reminder about confinement: communication is not *dialogical*, but *monological*. It 'almost always flows in one direction, inmates being forbidden to transmit information back to the world outside' (Jewkes, 2002: 108; but see also Johnson, 2010, forthcoming; Nellis, 2010, forthcoming; Tessler, 2010). To be sure, there can be no sympathy for a folk devil whose hell one barely sees. Nor can there be any sympathy for a devil who, for all we know, resides incorrigible in paradisiacal quarters, threatening by his very existence to turn the lives of the benign into living hells. Thus says Jewkes of prisoners and their doom: 'For so long have the press and television media ... constructed [them] as stigmatised "others", that the possibilities for empathy have closed down to all but those who have experienced incarceration, or have some other relevant experience on which to draw' (Jewkes, 2006: 151).

There is a glaring exception to all this, if one that justifies the rule. Not unlike life on the outside, prisoner life is subject to a process of hierarchisation according to levels of newsworthiness and morality. 'Celebrity' prisoners, that is, are more likely to meet the market 'threshold' for mass-mediated visibility than their run-of-the-mill counterparts, whilst those whom we may call *famous* celebrities in the sense of stardom are more likely to receive empathic representation than celebrities *infamous* in the sense of criminal notoriety. By contrast with the hundreds of 'anonymous' men, women and children who slash their wrists or hang themselves in utter desperation behind the bars of a prison, the attempted suicide of Ian Huntley and the suicides of Fred West and Harold Shipman were reported throughout the popular press (Jewkes, 2006; see also Jewkes, 2004, 2007; Mason, 2008). But they were never treated as so worthy of reflection as the roseate 23-day jail sentence of nouveau 'dumb blonde' celebrity Paris Hilton for driving with a suspended licence.

Before jetting off to Maui just days after her stint in jail, hotel heiress Hilton found the time – an entire hour! – to philosophise on CNN's *Larry King Live*: 'I feel like God does make everything happen for a reason. And [prison] gave me, you know, a timeout in life to really find out what's important and what I want to do, figuring out who I am.' Later on, after firmly reassuring the nail-biting world that she did not lose weight, Hilton was talked into reading out an excerpt from the daily journal she religiously kept behind bars: '[Imprisonment] is a process, a gift and a journey, and if we can travel it alone, although the road may be rough at the beginning, you find an ability

to walk it. A way to start fresh again. It's neither a downfall nor a failure, but a new beginning' (www.cnn.com/2007/showbiz/tv/06/27/king.hilton.transcript). The contemplative spectators could now sigh twice in relief. Not only was the prison proven capable of delivering its harsh but righteous task, it also cleansed the character flaws of the ideal ego – as this is what celebrities have become in an age of 'broken narratives' (Young, 2007: 184–7).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The overwhelming majority of people have no direct knowledge of the worlds of crime and criminal justice. Save for criminal justice professionals, lawbreakers and their 'significant others', victims and social researchers grappling with pertinent issues, the rest cannot but glean information solely from mass-mediated representations (Surette, 1998; Bennett, 2006; Cheatwood, 1998; Rafter, 2007; Wilson, 2003; Wilson and O'Sullivan, 2004). Alas, rather than cultivating communitarianism and deliberative democracy, the media play upon public fears by overstating the danger of criminal victimisation, targeting weak and marginalised swathes of the population, criticising the authorities for laxity, calling for more and harsher punitive measures, and blocking or neutralising the imagery of human suffering thereby caused. Whilst a detailed discussion of the reasons lying behind the stance of the media stretches beyond the scope of the present article, some general programmatic thoughts are offered in this section by way of epilogue.

The easy explanation would be that media networks promote their financial interests by providing the public with what it really wants. Bauman argues that, if media outlets are to pursue their economic interests successfully, they need to be fed by public attitudes at least to the same extent as they feed them. 'If television leads the world,' he writes, 'it is because it follows it; if it manages to disseminate new patterns of life, it is because it replicates such patterns in its own mode of being.' There is no point in wrangling over what comes first, Bauman concludes (Bauman, 2002: 161). Bourdieu appears to be more decisive. If, he claims, the media were oriented even slightly towards symbolic revolution, audiences themselves would rush to put a halt to it. Not that audiences ever have to express their wish directly. The model of economic competition ensures that the media confirm what people already know and leave their mental structures intact (Bourdieu, 1998; see also Kitzinger, 2004). Hilton's appearance as a penitent Magdalen, for example, nearly tripled King's usual audience, from an average 1.1 million to 3.2 million viewers. That it replaced a planned interview with guerilla filmmaker Michael Moore comes, from a Bourdieusian perspective, as no surprise.

To contend that economic interests lie behind the mass-mediated production of profound political effects is not to subscribe to what Bourdieu refers to as the 'half-baked version of materialism, associated with Marxism, [which] condemns without shedding light anywhere and ultimately explains nothing' (Bourdieu, 1998: 39). Media networks and their staff compete not just for economic capital (i.e., money or assets that can be tuned into money), but for its intangible, cultural equivalent as well (e.g., educational

credentials and claims to expert knowledge). This bifurcated model helps account for the ongoing tension between culturally rich but economically starved journalism of an alternative or literary orientation, on the one hand, and culturally poor but economically rich market journalism, on the other (Benson, 2006). Accumulating both forms of capital, as in the case of *Le Monde*, the *New York Times*, or the *Wall Street Journal*, allows one to wield economic and symbolic power over the entire field and even lay down the rules of practice therein.

And yet, as Bourdieu himself admits, whilst the media constitute a microcosm with its own laws, these laws are defined both by its position in the world at large and by the attractions and repulsions to which it is subject from other such microcosms. Consider, for example, 'economic censorship', whereby the management of media is determined by large corporations and conglomerates that own or finance the networks at issue (Bourdieu, 1998: 16). Consider also 'political censorship', whereby governments make appointments to senior public broadcasting management positions (1998: 15), or introduce policies that subjugate the independence of journalism to market principles (e.g., by tying funding to ratings and profit to advertising; see further Edwards and Cromwell, 2006; Golding and Murdock, 2000; Marlière, 2000; Mathiesen, 1997; McQueen, 1998; Osborne, 2007; Ruggiero, 2000; Sampson, 2004; Surette, 1997).

But why the need to censor the media if all they are forced to do is offer people what they desire? If one were to accept that an increasing number of media outlets would otherwise deviate from the norm of distortion and sensationalism, the question is why not? What is at stake? Here it is apposite to recall the model proposed by Herman and Chomsky. Theirs is an invitation to take a step back and reconsider the degree to which the offerings of the commercialised media reflect the preferences and free choices of the public.

Polls regularly show that the public would like more news, documentaries and other information, and less sex, violence and other entertainment, even as they do listen to and watch the latter. There is little reason to believe that they would not like to understand why they are working harder with stagnant or declining incomes, have inadequate medical care at high costs, and what is being done in their name all over the world. If they are not getting much information on these topics, [it is because] the sovereigns who control the media choose not to offer such material.' (Herman and Chomsky, 1988/2002: xviii–xix; see also Chomsky, 1991/2002)

Unlike Bourdieu, Herman and Chomsky seem to dismiss the possibility that, once drawn into a hegemonic fallacy, the public might well insulate itself from associative connections with information traumatic to the self. Their model is nevertheless valuable in that it points emphatically to the role of the mass media in forming public opinion in the first instance so as to promote eventually the powerful interests that control and finance them. It is in this spirit that Hall et al. (1978) argue that sensationalised media reporting, on the one hand, and harsh penal measures by the state and its agencies, on the other hand, combine to displace mass economic and ontological insecurities onto powerless minorities, thereby justifying the drift towards ideological repression (see also Wacquant, 2009).

One need not presume some form of crude intervention by the powerful in the daily workings of the media, nor a continuous behind-the-scenes coordination between the two. Attention should rather be paid to institutional structures and the routine professional decisions they engender about media values and practices. Journalists, for example, tend to internalise priorities and definitions of newsworthiness that conform to long-standing institutional habits (see, e.g., Ericson et al., 1987). This is why the role of the media in the legitimisation of immoralities should be addressed by reference to semiotic aestheticisation, more so than by denouncing 'bias' and in pursuit of an abstract objectivity. To phrase it differently, the question is to examine how the media serve the interests of the powerful by operating, not as a tool of propaganda, but as a tool of democracy – a public sphere that legitimises the taking of sides without abandoning the principle of objective representation and deliberation (Chouliaraki, 2007; see also Lewis, 2004; Solomon, 2006). This should cause no dismay to the critical scholar. The aim, in the final analysis, is not to apportion guilt, but to reveal all texts of mediation that need to be reversed, if a change for the better is to be effectuated.

Notes

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- 1 On a recent account of the ways in which, and the extent to which, a psychoanalytic focus on the unconscious may shed light on the effects of the media on audiences, see Carrabine, 2008: 57–75.
- 2 This emancipatory technique is what dramatist Bertolt Brecht describes with the somewhat confusing term 'estrangement'. The action in Brechtian drama is often stopped or even frozen into a *tableau vivant*, and much in the fashion of the ancient chorus, songs help the audience contemplate (see further, Bloch et al., 1970).
- 3 Although not deriving from any sort of moral injunction, relentless media displays of the glittering prizes of capitalist consumerist society may demythologise the availability of legitimate opportunities and the fair distribution of wealth in the eyes of marginalised groups, heighten minority consciousness, and eventually generate widespread clamour for equal rights and consistency of treatment (see, e.g., Meyrowitz, 1985).
- 4 For an account of how media dramas of crime may be situated within broader discourses on the family, see Tzanelli et al., 2005.

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