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## Introduction to Counterdiscourses and Counterpublics in Cinema, Art, Media and Literature

**Abstract:** This text is a brief introduction to the notions of counterpublic, public sphere and counterdiscourses, as well as a short overview of the articles included in the current themed issue.

**Keywords:** counterpublic, counterdiscourse, public sphere, publics.

The studies dedicated to counterdiscourses and their relationship with publics and counterpublics are already part of a rich and diverse academic tradition. The seminal essays exploring the notion of public sphere and other related issues such as public debates, political participation or media discourses can be traced back to John Dewey and lead to authors like Hannah Arendt or Jürgen Habermas. A large variety of approaches and numerous researches—from social and political theory to historical and cultural analysis, from literary theory to cinema, media or art studies—exist today.

The notion of “public,” argued Michael Warner, deals with more than the passive recipients of literary, artistic or cinematic discourses. We understand the “public” as a social entity, a dynamic arena where aesthetic, ideological and cultural values are performed, exchanged and collectively created.

In his critical account of the formation and role of the “public sphere,” Jürgen Habermas indicated how the structures of the emerging liberal (or bourgeois) public have played a central role in defining ideas of democracy, participation and public debate. The liberal “public sphere”

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depicted the ideal of an unrestricted, independent and neutral arena where participants could freely express and discuss matters of „public interest.” In her response to Jürgen Habermas’ analysis, Nancy Fraser noted that, in spite of its apparent espousal of equality, reason and accessibility as ideals, the liberal model had a marked class character and rested, in fact, on exclusionary practices that consistently marginalized the voices of women, working class people, people of colour, etc. The term “subaltern counterpublics,” coined by Fraser, described alternative public arenas where “members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (67). Estranged from the official public sphere, these subaltern counterpublics (or, as Michael Warner called them, “minor publics”) stand in clear opposition to it. On the other hand, as noted by Kathy Ferguson, while challenging the dominant norms (and frequently domination itself as a paradigm structuring the public sphere), minor counterpublics (and their counterdiscourses) are not only negations, but also affirmations of different social, ideological or artistic values and practices. Their antagonistic and critical stance cannot be separated from their exploratory dimension and emancipatory potential.

Though subaltern and often marginal, counterpublics are not completely isolated. In relation to the dominant public sphere they play a double role. On one hand they offer critical perspectives on the dominant discourses; on the other hand, they smuggle oppositional practices, values and ideas into the public arena, sometimes effectively unsettling it. Minor and marginal counterpublics thus oppose unilateral narratives and hegemonic discourses, reminding the inherent multiplicity and diversity of the “common.”

If publics are primarily “spaces of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself” (Michael Warner 50), then a reflection regarding “subaltern,” “minor” or “radical” publics is also a reflection on their specific modes of expression and realization—ideological, artistic, or literary.

As illustrated by the contributions to our latest *Ekphrasis* issue, the question of counterdiscourses (and counterpublics) can offer a generous framework for exploring the inherent multiplicity and diversity of our contemporary societies and cultural representations, with issues such as political and social imaginaries, aesthetic norms and practices, theoretical subversion, oppositional forms of expression, etc., being analysed and discussed.

Doru Pop invites reflection on a series of issues related to academic research in the field of humanities. Inspired by Paul Feyerabend’s epistemological anarchism, and drawing upon the idea of *irreverent thinking*—a philosophical and methodological approach shared, among others, by Socrates, Plato, Nietzsche or Marx—the author advocates in favor of a “methodless method,” informed by a nomadic, transversal attitude, that constantly questions the established order, as well as its own premises. Doru Pop’s “raid” on academic discourses is not only a call to subvert the regime of “scientific” expertise and discipline, but first and

foremost a compelling argument in favor of knowledge as such. The destabilizing attitude implied by this “amethodical method” is not a gratuitous exercise, but an emancipatory practice to constantly discover, create and recreate new research tools, new connections and new understandings.

Martina Martausová focuses on the portrayal of disability in cinema, using a recent American production, *The Peanut Butter Falcon* (2019), in order to discuss some of its social and political implications. While seeking to challenge the dominant perceptions on disability and to convey an authentic, positive and inclusive image of it, the film’s narrative remains, in the end, structured by the same dichotomy between the norm and the difference, between ability and impairment. The particular case study analysed by the author is, however, illustrative for the dynamic and complex relation between minoritarian narratives and dominant discourses. Going through the various on-screen representations of disability—from “infirmity” to the “supercrip” trope—Martina Martausová reflects on the inherent limits of on-screen depictions of disabled characters, especially when coming from a majoritarian, able-bodied perspective.

Horea Poenar’s “Between the Angel of History and Revolution. Jazz on the Threshold,” proposes a reading of jazz emerging as a revolutionary and oppositional form of expression during the ‘50s and the ‘60s. From a mere form of popular culture and entertainment, jazz became a medium in which everything was questioned: the role and meaning of art, social inequalities, racial injustice, political and media discourses, etc. Jazz performers, whose collective (and political) relevance was obscured by mythologization in the media, turned into figures of insubmission and collective change. Through their personal lives, as well as through their music, they conveyed a sense of estrangement and disenchantment with contemporary arrangements—social, political, discursive, artistic. Resisting conformity and co-option had a political meaning beyond that of critique and dissent. In this sense, jazz was a means to explore and invent new ways of creating music, but also of being together: a common endeavour to imagine and enact the unknown collective possibilities of the present.

Alice Teodorescu analyses contemporary Japanese animation discourses and the subversive dimension of *kawaii* (or “cuteness”), a form of youth (sub)culture. Through a comparative analysis of three recent animated series, the author highlights *kawaii*’s transformation from a commercialized aesthetic, associated with escapism, consumerism and normalization, into a site of counterdiscourse, social critique and parody.

Mehmet Sari investigates the appreciation of “badfilms” and their transformation into cult artifacts by cinephiles, with a focus on Neil Breen’s *Fateful Findings* (2013). Sari interprets the enthusiastic reception of disaster films (and of their spectacular failings) as a form of counter-aesthetics negating the traditional hierarchies of taste, as well as the result of collective viewing practices based on “schadenfreude” (or the satisfaction felt at someone else’s failures and misfortunes).

Using an Althusserian theoretical framework, Bageshree Trivedi examines, through the comparative analysis of two Indian films from the '80s—a transitional period also known as the post-Emergency era—the subversive dimension of cinematic discourse and its counterdiscursive potentialities. The author discusses the role of cinema in revealing the structures of authority, and the pervasiveness of economic and social disparities in a seemingly democratic society, also bringing into question the repressive constitution of the public sphere.

Anca Doczi Luchian proposes an exploration of Applied Drama and of its role in generating social knowledge, community participation and political engagement. In order to illustrate the importance that spaces/locations have in shaping perceptions and social relations, the author presents *Memodrome: Home*, a public performance she designed and staged in 2016 at the Horniman Museum in London. The aim of the performance was to create, through “guided interaction” and storytelling, a space for inclusiveness, dialogue and knowledge, and thus to challenge the stereotypical narratives regarding migration, prevalent at the time in the British press. *Memodrome* can be an illustrative example for the way theater methodologies generate counterdiscourses and can create counterpublic spaces.

Silvia Mascheroni's paper presents seven female-directed documentaries dedicated to characters and events surrounding the Algerian struggle for independence. The documentaries question both the colonial and the nationalist narratives, focusing on the important role played by women during the war, in an attempt to reveal their exclusion from the official accounts and to preserve their stories. At the same time, they try to deconstruct the masculinized and mythologized narratives of history, reaffirming the plurality of experiences and the need to overcome the unilateral, exclusive and patriarchal constitution of the public sphere.

Aylin Altunbulak's article concentrates on the political significance of queer film festivals. More than cultural environments dedicated to artistic exchanges, queer film festivals can also function as counterpublic spaces, community forums where political and cultural practices are developed and deployed. Discussing Pink Life Queerfest, the author critically reflects on the issues raised by the “globalization” of queer experiences, as well as on the importance of understanding local contexts when analyzing the constitution of alternative discursive spaces and their role as platforms for queer visibility, political resistance and culture.

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