

FILM SWAPPING IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE: YOUTH AUDIENCES AND ALTERNATIVE CULTURAL PUBLICITIES

GÖRAN BOLIN

Abstract

The article discusses questions concerning the cultural public sphere in relation to empirical material from a media ethnography of young men's use of extremely violent action and horror films on video, and how the young men's cultural practices, including media reception and film swapping, relates to their cultural production in the form of fanzines and amateur video films. The aim is to analyse this practice of film swapping, fanzine writing and amateur video making, in terms of cultural publicness, in order to shed light on those micro processes of communication that result in the formation of public spheres of various kinds. In the first part of the article some theoretical implications of the concepts cultural and political public spheres are discussed. Then follows a discussion on the internal communicative patterns within this alternative cultural public sphere, organised informally around fanzines and amateur video festivals. The dynamic relation between this alternative public sphere and other public formations, alternative as well as dominating or bourgeois, is then dealt with, and the different approaches among the various individuals is discussed. This is then followed by a discussion on the alternative cultural public's relation to the market and state systems. Lastly, some general conclusions are drawn, covering the need to analytically separate cultural and political public spheres in order not to forget the task of the cultural public in mediating between market system and lifeworld, and thus not to dismiss the political implications of the cultural.

Göran Bolin is Assistant Professor in Media and Communication Studies, University College, Huddinge, email: goran.bolin@sh.se.

The public sphere have since long been at the centre of the discussion on the place of the media in society. Much of this discussion has concerned the organisation of media institutions and policy questions connected to this, for example in relation between public service and commercial television. Although this discussion ultimately has consequences for the media audiences, and their access (or lack thereof) to forums for public debate (either as spectators or as participants), very few studies have in fact been based on specific audiences as empirical material (however, see Livingstone and Lunt 1994). Apart from this concentration on media organisations and media policy, there has also been a general bias towards discussions on the political public sphere, i.e. the sphere where matters of state interest are discussed. And, important as this is for questions of democracy, it is at the cost of a neglect of the cultural public sphere, i.e. the sphere where cultural commodities are created, exchanged, consumed and discussed.

In what follows I will enter a discussion on questions concerning the cultural public sphere in relation to empirical material from media ethnography of young men's use of video nasties, i.e. video films with extremely violent content (Bolin 1998). I will focus on how the young men in their cultural practices engage in different kinds of cultural production — mostly in the form of fanzines and amateur video films.

I followed these young men from late 1992 to 1996. At the time there were five action and horror fanzines produced in Sweden: *Black*, *Violent Vision*, *Shock*, *Broken Minds* and *Röd Snö* (Red Snow), the two first-mentioned written in English. A sixth, *Magasin Defekt*, came on to the scene in 1995. Since the fieldwork of my study dates back to the former half of the 1990s, all these fanzines started out in written form and were distributed on paper via ordinary mail. However, two were launched on the Internet during the study, and had the material been collected today, this would probably be the main channel for distribution. In addition to the fanzine producers, three groups of amateur video producers were part of the empirical material — ILEX Productions, Tombstone Pictures and a group of high school students.¹

I call them Film Swappers, because of their main distinctive feature — swapping films with each other. It is illegal to publicly screen or privately distribute some of these films in Sweden, and this fact is a prerequisite for the development of the Film Swappers' practices, and it explains why some of them have extensive international contacts. Films shown at cinemas have been the subject of the Swedish national censorship since 1911, and legislation on video was introduced in 1981, after a heated debate on video nasties.

Of profound importance for the communicative structures among the Film Swappers are fanzines. Some of the Swedish fanzines have international circulation. Within this structure, there also circulate amateur video films, made by Film Swappers inspired by what they have seen. Sometimes, screenings of these are organised into smaller film festivals. Central to the communication within fanzines and in festivals is the ongoing debate on which films are worth watching, which directors are good, etc. As I have discussed such matters of content elsewhere (cf. Bolin 1994 and 2000), I will only touch on these distinctive practices briefly in this article, and focus instead on how communication is formally organised.

My aim in this article is to analyse this practice of film swapping, fanzine writing and amateur video making, in terms of cultural publicness, in order to shed light on those micro processes of communication that ultimately result in the formation of public spheres of various kinds. I will firstly discuss some theoretical implications of

the concepts cultural and political public spheres. Secondly, I will focus on the internal communicative patterns of the Film Swappers, and argue that it can be seen as an alternative cultural public sphere. Thirdly, I will discuss how this alternative public sphere is related to other alternative publics as well as to the bourgeois public sphere. Fourthly, I will discuss this alternative cultural public's relation to the market and state systems. Lastly, I will point to some conclusions that can be drawn from the study, and the relation between communicative form and content.

Cultural and Political Public Spheres

Jürgen Habermas did not use the concept of the cultural public sphere in his *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. When he discussed questions related to other areas than the political, he used the concept of the literary public sphere. This sphere he considered as an early form of the political publicity, the "training ground for a critical public reflection" (Habermas 1962/1989, 29). This view of the cultural aspects of the public sphere seems to have been inherited by most of his followers, for example Nicholas Garnham (1992, 373), who discusses matters of media and the public sphere, but symptomatically delimits media practice to the making of news.

Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge (1972/1993) have in their critique of Habermas' conceptualisation of the public sphere expanded on his theories, adding other forms of publicness than the bourgeois public sphere, e.g. the possibility of there being or becoming a proletarian public sphere, based on collective experience rather than competitive individualism. Their concept thus includes a cultural dimension, as it — apart from institutions like "law enforcement, the press, public opinion, the public, public sphere work, streets, and public squares" — also encompass "the horizon of experience" connected to people's "contexts of living" (*Lebenszusammenhang*; Negt and Kluge 1972/1993, 1ff and 6).

Nancy Fraser (1987 and 1992) also expands on Habermas' concept, and theorises a plurality of public spheres, with examples drawn from the feminist movement, organised around their own "variegated array of journals, bookstores, publishing companies, film and video distribution networks, lecture series, academic programs, conferences, conventions, festivals" (Fraser 1992, 123; cf. Calhoun 1995, 245ff). Her discussion thus also includes cultural practices, although she explicitly does not differentiate between cultural and political public spheres on the argument that the private, to which cultural questions have traditionally been referred, is also political (1992, 128).

The concept of the cultural public sphere seems to have been first suggested by Frands Mortensen, who claims it to be institutionalised in "the association," and spatially situated in museums, churches, exhibitions, concert halls, cinemas, libraries, sports grounds and theatres (Mortensen 1977; Mortensen and Møller 1976).

Analyses of the public sphere have mostly had oral or written discourse as their focus, thus downplaying other forms of communication. For example, Habermas did not consider the cinema to contribute to the discussion within the public sphere, but rather belonging to the sphere of private consumption and thus deprived of the function of communicating public reason (Habermas 1962/1989, 163). This might follow from his bias towards the political dimensions of the public sphere, although it may also have to do with the fact that the cinema, in many countries, has not had the same constitutional protection of freedom of expression that the printed word has had, but instead has often been subjected to censorship.² However, as Miriam Hansen has

shown, an extended concept of the public sphere as developed by Negt & Kluge is useful when analysing mass media audiences, for example the cinema audience (Hansen 1990/1994; 1991; 1993a). She argues that “the production of life contexts crucially includes practices of consumption, of mass-cultural reception and interpretation,” which opens up for a study of “collective, subcultural formations of reception (crystallising, for instance, around particular stars, genres, or modes of exhibition)” (Hansen 1993b, xxxiii; cf. 1991, 7).

However, a reception experience not communicated does not qualify as public expression (cf. McLaughlin 1993, 614), but possibly as a potential for creating a public forum. Shared experiences of films and other visual media could make the starting point for public discussions and might thereby be seen as a kind of proto-public sphere. Thus even cultural publicness demands organisational forms for their constitution and maintenance. This makes Hansen’s arguments somewhat problematic.

This springs from the fact that all public spheres are centred around public communicative practices on matters that are of general interest for the discussants. Thus it also becomes important to differentiate between several types of communicative practices, in line with Habermas’ (1981/1992 and 1981/1997) theories on communicative and strategic action. Communicative action aims at mutual understanding, whereas strategic action is success-oriented action of either open or concealed character, of which the concealed variant can be either unconsciously deceptive (systematically distorted) or consciously deceptive (manipulative) (see Habermas 1981/1992, 333). What I will concentrate on in my analysis is the communicative action type. Communication is of course of founding importance for all kinds of public discussion, but since the Film Swappers communication is not based on face-to-face communication, their public communication is of a somewhat special kind. My informants were scattered all over Sweden. In fact, none of them had met in real life during my fieldwork. All contacts were mediated via telephone, letters, fanzine and video swapping, and — to a lesser extent — e-mail.

In order to analyse the Film Swappers’ practices I will align myself with a conceptualisation of cultural public spheres that is more inclusive than the Habermasian concept, but more narrow than Hansen’s.

Super-Public, Bourgeois and Alternative Public Spheres

If one holds that there are several public spheres, it follows that these can be related to each other in a number of ways. Firstly there is communication within the different spheres, and secondly there are communicative links between different kinds of public spheres, of which the common, bourgeois public sphere holds a dominant position. Together all these spheres can be seen as a super-public sphere (Habermas 1987/1992, 390; 1985/1987, 359; 1992, 425).

The concept of “alternative” public spheres indicates an alternative to some larger unit or dominant structure. The plurality of public spheres has been described by Alexander Kluge as “universal provincialism,” meaning that there are “a pluralism of public spheres” that “do not understand each other” (Liebman 1988, 44). This seems to be a too hasty conclusion on the state of public discussion, since no discussion forum is entirely separated from every other discursive forum in society. The Film Swappers are inescapably connected to many other spheres, including the dominating bourgeois public sphere. As the Film Swappers’ public sphere is differently struc-

tured from the bourgeois public sphere it could be said to be an alternative to it. Seen in relation to a super-public sphere, it could be said to be separate from the more dominating bourgeois public sphere and other alternative publics.

The aspect of internationalisation is also important, since the Film Swappers have had to make contacts abroad to get hold of films. However, apart from the international dispersal, there are also distinct national features that are characteristic of their practices, above all in the relations to national institutions and formations of power that they are positioned against. In Sweden, the National Swedish Board of Film Censors regulates moving images in public theatres as well as on the video rental market. These regulations can certainly be different in other countries, ranging from a total absence of formal legislation to the very strict. These differences make the Film Swappers adapt nationally. In the following I will discuss and analyse the Swedish Film Swappers, and highlight their national specificity, but I also consider the international dimensions of their practices.

A Film-Swapping Alternative Public Sphere

At the time of the fieldwork, the Film Swappers did make up an alternative public sphere. Firstly, their *production* makes up an alternative to the late capitalist public spheres of production (cf. Sholle 1995). It can be argued that the film swapping fanzine editors lie closer to Negt and Kluge's ideal, i.e. that producers within alternative public spheres are needed to meet real needs among the consumers. As fanzine editors and fanzine readers share the same experiences, there is a closer relationship between them, than is the case between producers and consumers within the bourgeois public sphere.

Secondly, the Film Swappers' forms of *distribution* differ from distribution within the bourgeois public sphere. Fanzines are mostly ordered directly from the editor. Some fanzine editors have started what could be called alternative distribution "companies" for fanzines and video films, and there are examples of such attempts in Sweden as well. These distributors are often producers of media texts themselves, for example the young Norwegian man who, besides distributing fanzines from different countries, also produce avant-garde video compilations, and his own fanzine, both entitled *Rage*.

Thirdly, the Film Swappers emphasise an alternative taste for film content, as well as alternative *criteria for evaluation*, in opposition to what they consider a mainstream repertoire of US Hollywood productions and its related value system. There is thus a rejection of the things that circulate within the forums of the traditional bourgeois cultural public spheres, e.g. national Swedish newspapers, cinemas, radio and television. In their own words they characterise this as being "underground."

On the other hand, this does not mean that they do not take part in traditional cultural publicness. Of course, they read national newspapers, watch television and listen to mainstream radio. But as their tastes and interests are directed to cultural forms that they consider neglected by these media, they launch their own alternatives.

As the genres appreciated by the Film Swappers are not easily accessible, it is more important for them, compared to other media audiences, to develop contacts with people from a larger geographical area in order to get hold of films, and exchange experiences of these. Most people in Sweden rely on the audio-visual media texts

supplied by TV, cinema and video rental stores. The Film Swappers, however, have a taste that cannot be satisfied that way, and accordingly have to look elsewhere. Their communicative practices are thus to a high degree disconnected from physical space. Just like radio amateurs, these young men try to get social contact with other young men interested in the same media genres (cf. Sundin 1990). In the symbolic space created by these communicative patterns, Film Swappers engage in a public discussion on censorship, freedom of speech and on the value of cultural artefacts.

This networking with a public dimension is by no means a new phenomenon. New media, not least computer based media such as Internet and World Wide Web, have fuelled the discussion on publicness, resulting in wide array of publications (e.g. Benedikt 1991/1992, Dahlgren 1996, Jones 1995, Mitchell 1996, Sassi 1996). All this adds to the longstanding discussion on television, public service systems and the public sphere (e.g. Bondebjerg 1990, Curran 1991, Dahlgren 1995, Garnham 1992, Livingstone and Lunt 1994, Thompson 1995). The “newness” of this discussion is also questioned by one of my informants, who points to the fact that letter writing has long connected people with special interests and enthusiasms around the world.

It is hard to argue against such an assertion, even if one could also acknowledge the change in speed brought forth by new media technology. Radio amateurs and other enthusiasts have been around for a long time. Film Swapping as a community-building force is just another activity to add to old ones.

Internal Communication

All Swedish Film Swappers thus have well-developed contacts in order to get hold of video films. These networks vary in size and reach. Some of my informants swap films with persons from large parts of the world (e.g. Australia, Greece, The Netherlands), others have a Nordic, or “merely” Swedish, reach. However, they are all involved in informal networks that are more extensive than their immediate social surroundings. How the different person’s film swapping is organised is governed by both individual taste and social and organisational capacity.

The two main forums in the Film Swappers alternative public sphere are the fanzines and alternative film festivals. At such festivals it is possible to see films produced both by amateurs and by the culture industries. They also provide an opportunity to socialise with others that can become possible exchange partners or sources of information on where to get hold of films. Such information is also provided by fanzines, for example in the form of ads, where foreign distributors with postal order services inform readers of their catalogues and prices. There are also smaller ads where people want to swap, buy or sell films. Fanzines are also useful for information on which films are most popular, which can be deduced from which films and directors get most attention, as well as from the “play lists” of the editors. Letters to the editors also function as a micro forum within fanzines. With the increased use of Internet, web pages have become more important, although only two of the fanzines in my material started their own home page during the time of my field study. The most common media were the telephone and letter writing.

This has undoubtedly changed since the time of the fieldwork, and would it have been carried out today, the Internet would probably be their most common communication channel. An indication of this is that several of my informants developed an interest in internet and web page production at the end of my fieldwork, and the only

new fanzine on the action and horror film market launched since 1997 — *Video Ferox* — was launched in a paper and a net version from the very start. There are also examples of Swedish clubs that are exchanging, swapping and selling videos, that could be found on the world wide web during the late 1990s.

The Film Swappers have fanzines (in either paper or web version) as the centre of their alternative sphere, just in the same way as the traditional public sphere had newspapers. The papers were media for proclaiming opinions and debate, but also functioned as objects of debate and arguments in coffeehouses and other public institutions. However, the Film Swappers' debate is not concerned with the political issues of the day, but with the making of (alternative) film canons, and, following from that, in social *communication*, i.e. in the making of social communities via communication and debate on a certain specifically defined thematic field. The questions debated in horror film fanzines would arguably be of little interest to those who do not share this taste in films, but this does not make the practice less public — every person that accepts the terms set up by the Film Swappers (i.e., he or she has to like horror films with extreme violence and the discourse around it) is welcomed to take part in the sphere. It does not have to be agreed on which director is the greatest, or which horror and violence genres are the best. But there has to be a mutual acceptance of the legitimacy of discussing these genres and directors on the same terms as everybody else. This makes the Film Swappers' practices inclusive rather than exclusive (cf. Habermas 1992/1994, 452).

This can be exemplified by the following two judgements, picked from the same page in the same fanzine, written by two different writers:

If Jess Franco had made only one film in his career and that film was Macumba Sexual, then I would have to call him a genius. But not so. For every good or watchable film he makes a dozen of bad ones. But Macumba Sexual is definitely the work of a truly inspired filmmaker and the best film I've seen this side of the sixties wearing Franco's name. I mean, he even manages to make Ajita Wilson look sexy and I can hardly think of a more impressive achievement. The scene where he/she, together with two sex-slaves, goes out in the desert, digging out a penis-shaped amulet to play with, is really something special. And, by the way, Lina Romay (using her pseudonym "Candy Coster") still looks great in a bikini, although she for the most of the time forgets to put it on (Violent Vision 3, 46).

Let's face it. This isn't a good movie. This is a bad movie. This is a boring movie and most of all, a damn waste of time.

Love Camp plays like a drunk Jess Franco on autopilot. Lots of naked girls, a lot of fucking and some funky, groovy disco scenes! It doesn't matter that Laura Gemser and Gabriele Tinti have the leading parts, this film is as dead as Lucio Fulci [Italian director who had recently deceased]. A guy with golden hair leads a "love sect" where the participants live like hippies under direct orders from love goddess Gemser. The police wants to close the camp (fascists!). After a looong while the film turns into a Jim Jones story à la Eaten Alive and everybody except the golden haired guy and his whimsy girl survives. The only enjoyable scene is a wild karate fight at the end. You can really see how the actor struggles to do something that slightly resembles karate, and the director off screen convincing him that "it will look okay when we edit the film." It didn't look okay, but what the hell, neither did the rest of the film.

To put it another way, Christian Anders' Love Camp has the looks and the smell of Jess Franco. But it isn't, still it's only for you guys who think that zooming in and out of vaginas is the main component for a fun Friday night (Violent Vision 3, 46).

The two films share common traits of nudity and violence, but while the first author sees this positioning by the film text of the spectator into a voyeuristic position as unproblematic, the second review can be read as a comment on the first, placing the argument in the last sentence on a more general level, thus problematising this kind of activity.

That I have started my discussion with examples from the fanzine-producing part of the Film Swappers is by no means a coincidence. The written word has almost always been the focus when aspects of the public sphere have been discussed, less so other forms of expression. This bias towards the written word also reveals in our everyday language — you *publish* a magazine or a fanzine, but you *release* a record or a video film. I will in the next few paragraphs try to elaborate a bit on aspects of cultural productivity that are in less logocentric forms, such as video films, and how they can be related to the public sphere.

In Sweden there has during the 1990's been an increase in so-called zero budget film festivals, where amateur film and video producers can present their works. Sometimes the films from such festivals have been shown on local television. These kinds of festivals are often arranged as club meetings for members, in order to circumvent the legislation on censorship. Festivals of this kind are arranged at several levels: locally, nationally, and on a Nordic level. It is also a common phenomenon elsewhere in Europe and the US, where festivals of this kind can gather hundreds of participants (cf. Vogelgesang and Winter 1990).

If seen in the perspective of these festivals, the Film Swappers are definitely “deterritorialised” in “transnational networks of distribution and consumption,” as Miriam Hansen (1993b, xxv) puts it, but these networks also comprise production of cultural artefacts (and thus not only production of meaning). If we look at the video film-producing part of the Film Swappers we can notice a “cultural circuit” where the boundary between producers and consumers is dissolving. Put it differently — the sphere of production, the sphere of distribution and the sphere of consumption overlap. Although not all Film Swappers are producers, distributors and consumers, they comprise a public structure, with tight connections between these functions in the cultural circuit. And although it might be hard to know from where to enter this structure, it is not based on exclusion, but open to anyone who share the same taste in films and videos.

It is, however, doubtful whether the Film Swappers' publicness meets the criteria of equality. Some Film Swappers certainly have higher social status than others do. This ideal of equality is also a contested feature of the traditional bourgeois public sphere, where, for example, women and working classes were excluded (cf. Fraser 1992, 119; Negt and Kluge 1972/1993, 14). But, contrary to the bourgeois public sphere, status differences are established *from within* (taking the form of strategic action aimed at acquiring a higher social position among the Film Swappers), rather than being a prerequisite for entering into the public discussion (cf. Bolin 1994 and 2000).

Processes of hierachisation are of course of crucial importance for the construction of alternative public spheres. The founding initiative for developing an alternative

conversation is, firstly, that one finds that there is something wrong with the discussion within the bourgeois, common public discussion, for example that certain opinions are not expressed, and secondly, that one's voice is not strong enough or simply not allowed to speak out in this forum. Thus alternative spheres always grow from some sort of subordination.

The Film Swappers share experiences of subordination, partly because they are young, as youth are relatively low on political and economic power. This is, however, a characteristic all young people share, and cannot explain why some would form alternative public spheres. In addition to this, all of my informants share negative experiences from (primary) school, leading them to have chosen brief, vocational education (although this pattern is more obvious among the fanzine editors, than among the amateur video producers).

This does not mean, however, that they have failed in school. Some of them left school with average marks. It is rather a disagreement from the Film Swappers side on what is to be considered relevant knowledge. It is indicative that the editor of *Black*, who from the age of sixteen/seventeen and for the next couple of years, produced an English language fanzine with global reach (90 percent of the circulation of 300 went abroad to all continents but Africa), but left school with the second lowest grade in English.

The rejectionist stance towards school is by no means unconditional. Some Film Swappers have been engaged in dialogues with school representatives on the evaluation of films and cultural artefacts, mostly in relation to questions on censorship and freedom of speech. This makes them intertwined with the bourgeois public sphere, as well as the official systems, for instance the institutionalised National Swedish Board of Film Censors.

External Relations — “A Forum until Better Times”

The editor of *Röd Snö* has related to me that his class in secondary school used to watch and discuss films with violent content on his initiative. He concluded that his female teacher, although not always approving of his taste, nevertheless agreed to the screenings, and respected his standpoints in relation to freedom of speech, the freedom of aesthetic expression, etc. His experiences also covers the opposite reaction from teachers, as revealed by a story he tells about him trying to sow Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (UK 1971) during a language lesson. This time the teacher disrupted the screening after five minutes, as she did not find it reasonable to watch such films in school.

One of the editors of *Violent Vision* has also shown horror films in class at the People's High School that he went to,³ and he said that he and the male teacher, whom he considered “terribly liberal” in his view on fictive violence, were on the same level, while his classmates were upset.

But the Film Swappers are not only intertwined with legitimatised structures in relation to school. As well as reading English fanzines and journals such as *Fangoria*, *Slaughter*, *The Dark Side*, etc., the Film Swappers also read “mainstream” Swedish film magazines and journals such as *Filmhäftet* and *Chaplin*. The editor of *Röd Snö* has even written a debate article in his own fanzine in opposition to a previous article on the films *Braindead* (1992) and *Man Bites Dog/C'est arrivé près de chez vous* (1992) in *Chaplin*. Censorship is also frequently debated in editorials, under headings such as “Censorshit.

Hell ain't a bad place to be" (*Violent Vision* no 1/1994), where the editor compares the censorship situation in Sweden and the UK, finding the latter country to be worse for Film Swappers.

There are also examples where the fanzines take up discussions going on in the Swedish tabloids, like when the Swedish censors wanted to cut eleven seconds from Martin Scorsese's *Cape Fear* (1991). One might think, from these examples, that the flow of texts would go in only one direction, but there are examples of the opposite movement. *Black* has been mentioned in *Nöjesguiden* — a monthly paper on culture and entertainment that is distributed for free at clothes stores, cinemas and restaurants — and the first number of the editor's subsequent publication — *Salong Finess* — was reviewed in the second largest national newspaper in Sweden, *Svenska Dagbladet* (31/03/1995). There have also been interviews with the editors of *Violent Vision* in a couple of regional newspapers.

These exchanges could be seen as examples of meetings between an alternative public sphere exemplified by the fanzines, and the bourgeois public represented by *Svenska Dagbladet*, *Chaplin*, *Filmhäftet*, *Nöjesguiden*. In order to mediate between these different spheres, there have to be "people who are multicodeal and competent in facilitating communication between the two domains" (Dahlgren 1995, 159). Those with such multicodeal dispositions are more likely to be situated within the dominating sphere, however. There are, for example, journalists who have themselves backgrounds within the alternative fora, and subsequently have entered the bourgeois public sphere. These people can move between the two kinds of spheres with an ease that most people within the alternative spheres cannot.

The representatives for the alternative public spheres are inclined to communicate within the bourgeois public to different extents. Some fanzine editors actively strive towards incorporation into the bourgeois public discussion, while others mark their distance. The editors of *Shock* are, for example, very careful to avoid being labelled a fanzine, and would probably not have anything against economic support from an established publisher. The same is true of the editors of *Magasin Defekt*, who have ads in mainstream publications like *Chaplin* for the film festival — Fantastic Film Festival — that they also arrange each year. Other editors protect their autonomy from system threats. The editors of *Violent Vision* argue for the importance of independence, in order "to be able to publish an issue on gay film without having to consider whether anyone is going to buy it or not."

Proximity to the dominating public sphere is reflected in circulation. It is therefore no coincidence that the fanzine *Shock* has the largest circulation, with a couple of thousand copies sold, while *Black*, *Broken Minds* and *Violent Vision* having the lowest circulation a couple of hundred. Accordingly *Shock* is considered mainstream by the other editors. This is also shown by the fact that they sometimes have reviews of films shown at regular theatres.

The will to communicate between the spheres is seldom expressed explicitly in fanzines. As mentioned above, representatives from the dominating public sphere usually initiate the exchanges. They approach fanzine editors or video amateurs for interviews, most often intending to exhibit them as freaks with abnormal behaviour. This fact has also been noted by, for instance, the editors of *Violent Vision*, who have turned down the "fame" offered through interviews, as they "do not want to be studied as monkeys in cages." There are, however, also examples of Film Swappers want-

ing to transgress the borders between the alternative and the dominating sphere. The editor of *Röd Snö* is, for example, perfectly aware of the stigmatising discourses surrounding his and other Film Swappers' media practices. However he holds a strong belief in the force of the better argument, and thinks that doubters could be convinced of the cultural value of certain extremely violent action and horror genres. He argues for the importance of maintaining a "dialogue" with the National Board of Film Censors, in order to convince them of the necessity not to forget the freedom of speech aspect of their practice. His democratic conviction in this respect reveal most clearly in his statement in an interview, that his fanzine "project" should be considered as a way of providing "a forum for discussion, until we see better times" (by which he means better times for people with the same taste as him in film).

The transgression is only partial, though, and in keeping with the ideal of a forum for better times, it is also necessary to protect the alternative from being subsumed by the bourgeois public, and thereby pacified. Thus there are also exclusive forces at play.

Through the rise of mass communication media, a larger part of the citizens of the west could *take part of* the public discussion, but where at the same time excluded from *taking part in it*.⁴ New communication technology has to a certain extent changed that. Instead we see the rise of new, alternative public spheres, formed around media with narrower reach, what Sarah Thornton (1995) calls niche and micro media. These alternative spheres constitute a compensating form of publicity by counteracting the exclusion tendencies brought about by the mass media. These alternatives are based on active participation, where there is at least a more realistic possibility for people otherwise deprived of the means of public communication, to get their voices heard (cf. Thompson 1995, 235ff).

The bourgeois public sphere can be considered an open space to which most people have access, even if most are unable to make their voices heard within. Instead, there are alternative public spheres open for active participation, and they thus function to provide forums for communication at the "local" level. Representatives of such alternatives can then, sometimes, make room for these views within the wider dominating public sphere.

Discursive exchange also runs in both directions: From the alternative domain comes discussion material that is then taken up within the bourgeois public discussion. On the other hand, questions on the agenda within the dominating media are sometimes initiated by representatives from the alternative domain. These questions do not always originate from oral or written discursive exchange, but can also be provoked by practices, such as importing and distributing illegal video films.

It can be concluded that both types of publicness are needed, both the ones that build on active communicative participation at micro level, and the common, visible and open domain that Thompson (1995) sketches out. The common bourgeois domain is needed in order to prevent total public fragmentation, with a multitude of mutually independent, with each other not communicating, alternative public spheres. The model with a plurality of public spheres that Nancy Fraser (1992) argues for, cannot explain why the alternative publics should communicate with each other. This, I argue, presupposes a common public sphere. In this way, the totality of the common public sphere and the different alternatives can be regarded as an internally differentiated, but still coherent super-public sphere.

External System Relations

The “ideal association” is the characteristic organisational form within the bourgeois cultural public sphere (Negt and Kluge 1972/1993, 258; Mortensen 1977, 300). This is the organisational form that has been adopted by some of the Film Swappers. For example, after they had been rejected by the local county media-workshop, for producing too violent videos, ILEX productions immediately formed and applied for state subsidies for their activities — subsidies that they eventually got. When they later applied for money for a full-length feature film from the Swedish Film Institute, however, they were turned down. Thus this project was never realised, and they then turned to productions of short films and music videos, which were less dependent on intense capital investments. Further, they have through, their personal connections with people at the Swedish Television, been able to edit some of their videos at their local production unit.

Other informants have experiences of state subsidies as well. When the editors of *Violent Vision* started out with the forerunner *Rare Zombie*, they organised themselves in a study circle and applied for funds before producing the first issue. They also adopted this organisational form for *Violent Vision*. They received the funding, and were accordingly the only Swedish fanzine in this genre that made a profit, although it was quite modest one. In order to be able to pay the printers, all other fanzines depended on the good will of either superiors (*Black/Salong Finess*), relatives (*Röd Snö*), or on private funding (*Broken Minds* and *Shock*). However, *Violent Vision*, which engaged different local printers, always managed to pay the bills via its state funding, and even had a small “buffer” of a couple of thousand Swedish crowns.

Sweden is a country with a long tradition of organised social movements, for example the workers movement, the temperance movement, the sports movement, etc. This has also shown up in areas where one would not expect any large degree of formal organisation, like rock music and other activities associated with popular culture. This has proved to be an extra complication when importing theories to Sweden, not least those concerning public spheres. Peter Dahlgren observes this complication when discussing the relation between state and civil society, and puts forth the question whether funding from the state to associations actually “tarnishes their civil society status.” He concludes, however, that “state financing has in fact largely enhanced that which we would call civil society and not merely incorporated it into the state” (Dahlgren 1995, 126). However, even if state subsidiaries do not necessarily lead to control, there is always the risk that state funding is followed by surveillance of the activities, or to integration into the bourgeois-liberal public sphere.

In addition to the above mentioned meetings between the Film Swappers and the state system, there are also examples of clashes with the economic system, where, for instance, the editors of *Violent Vision* have had problems with private printers, who did not want to print the fanzine on account of its content.

However, not all of the Film Swappers strive to be alternative or oppositional. There are, after all, those who wish for nothing but to be incorporated into the bourgeois-liberal public sphere. The fanzine *Shock*, for example, differs from the others in its ambition to become a “real” magazine, with distribution and production forms like “real” magazines. They did indeed negotiate with “ordinary” distributors to handle their product. When speaking to the editors, it is quite obvious that they did not fully identify with other editors or editorial groups, although they kept an eye on what

they were doing. However, I would still consider *Shock* a fanzine, as the production and distribution form is similar to the others. The same is true of *Magasin Defekt*, that wishes to be labelled a “prozine” (i.e. professional magazine) rather than a fanzine, and was accepted for public distribution via mainstream distributors in 1997.

A closer look reveals that the strategies of these two editorial groups are a step in the direction of a future vocational career. The editors of *Shock* have, for example, delivered several synopses on television series and film manuscripts, both in Sweden and abroad. And the main editor for *Magasin Defekt*, writes in the tabloid evening paper *Expressen*. This can be seen as a way of getting relevant qualifications outside of the traditional education system for entering the media system. This is also a tendency among the amateur video producers, who have become video instructors, and in that way they have become integrated in the common public sphere or in the system.

This lends an instrumental dimension to their practices, a strategic action aimed at making a vocational career within the dominating public sphere (cf. Habermas 1981/1992). This can be seen in contrast to the attempts to establish “communicative utopias” (Fornäs et al. 1988, 116), freed from claims of rationality. What is emphasised by some of the Film Swappers is the communicative, communifying dimension of the film swapping activity. This is in contrast to those entering the economic system’s rationale, where the “communicative action” type of behaviour is an obstacle in the struggle for economic effectivity. It inevitably brings with it the economically burdensome, but communicatively enriching, emphatic dimension of human communication.

As seen above, the Film Swappers defend their alternative public sphere from intrusion by the state and market systems. This defence is, however, not total. Some Film Swappers kept the door to the market system open. Furthermore, some of the fanzines published interviews with representatives for The National Swedish Board of Film Censors. One could expect this communication to be one-sided, i.e. that the voices enunciated in the fanzines would not reach the ears of state institutions like the Swedish censors. However, some of the fanzines have sent copies to the censors, and I know that members the censor’s staff have read at least some of them.

Such “accidental collision” of spheres, in Hansen’s (1993a, 205) words, can be seen as examples of the struggle between life world and systems, where the life world sets up correctives to systems conditioned dysfunctions within the bourgeois public sphere (Habermas 1981/1990).

To summarise the analysis of the Film Swappers’ alternative cultural public sphere, then, one could say that the Film Swappers have a similar attitude in their communicative relations towards each other — a prerequisite for considering the consequences of their practices as publicity. On the other hand, they are more heterogeneous in their relations to the dominant bourgeois public sphere, as well as the state and market systems.

Both fanzine producers and amateur video makers take part in the same public debate, since all have preferences for the same films and genres in their public discussions. The alternative public sphere has, in addition to the Swedish fanzines, other forums as well, in the form of fanzines from abroad (e.g. Danish *Trauma* and *Inferno*). In addition to that, they share a felt marginalisation in relation to, for example, school.

The Film Swappers have, however, different relations to the system. The editors of *Shock* and *Magasin Defekt* were, for example, more strategically oriented and tried to balance on the thin line between the system’s expectations of adapting to legitimate

production and distribution forms, and the lifeworld's insistence on expressivity grounded in experience. The other fanzine editors have a more suspicious relation to the system, and defend themselves from attempts at colonisation.

There are also differences in the way the editors and amateur video producers relate to the dominant, bourgeois public sphere. Also in this case the editors of *Shock* and *Magasin Defekt* have actively tried to cultivate their contacts in the common, bourgeois public sphere, in order to secure a career there, while the strategic action type exemplified by ILEX and Tombstone Pictures seems to have as a goal to take advantage of the cracks in the systems, in order to fulfil their projects. *Shock* and *Magasin Defekt* can be seen as being closer to the bourgeois public. They could be considered being exposed to higher pressures from the system, while *Black*, *Violent Vision*, *Broken Minds* and *Röd Snö* actively defend themselves from the dominating public sphere in order to preserve the autonomous status of their alternative public sphere. ILEX and Tombstone Pictures can be placed somewhere in-between these two extremes, as they defend their particularity at the same time as they take advantage of cracks in the wall of the dominant bourgeois public sphere.

Conclusions

As the traditional bourgeois public sphere has grown more intertwined with the system, alternative publics have developed as an extra buffer within the lifeworld in order to counteract threats of system colonisation. Within alternative publics, less powerful social groups, such as the Film Swappers, can raise their voices in a way that they are denied within the dominant, large scale, bourgeois public. These two types of public spheres are mutually dependent, and together they make up a super-public sphere, which is more dynamic than any single, dominant public. This analysis can also explain how new topics enter into the common, dominating bourgeois public sphere.

Public matters have traditionally been reduced to matters of the state. In order to be able to scrutinise the market system (e.g. commercialisation and similar threats against the lifeworld), one should not forget the implications of *the cultural public sphere*. Without this concept, the discussion on cultural matters run the risk of being reduced to questions of private consumption. As seen in some of the above examples, cultural discussions based on value judgements of cultural artefacts and practices often have political implications when raised to the level of generality, be it discussions on gender objectification, commercialisation of the cultural sector, or freedom of speech or artistic expression.

The different kinds of public spheres result from the ongoing modernisation process. One way to characterise the struggle to defend public spheres, art and culture from threats of system colonisation is as conservative forces attempting to counteract modernisation. This conservatism is, however, of a formal kind rather than ideological, i.e. not the kind of conservatism that wants to hold on to old values and cultural contents out of repetitive tradition. It is rather a kind of conservatism that contributes to the dynamic character of social life, constantly re-negotiating between lifeworld and systems. This conservatism can of course take different forms content-wise, depending on which political and/or cultural values it has at its focus (e.g. neo-nazis or advocates for freedom of speech). In order to evaluate these values, one has to turn to the content of communication.

In this article I have primarily focussed on the forms of discussion within the alternative public sphere that the Film Swappers have constructed through their communicative practices. I have paid relatively less attention to the contents of these discussions. At the heart of theories of publicness lies the supposition that public discourse should strive towards a common good for the members of society. Some would hold that it is questionable if this criteria is met in relation to what is discussed by the Film Swappers, and especially in relation to the content of the films that they watch with enjoyment, since some of them are undeniably problematic when seen, for example, from gender or ethnic perspectives. That the films are problematic does, however, highlight and illustrate the dynamic character of publicness, where evaluations of such sometimes problematic cultural expressions are at the heart of the discussion, possibly resulting in normative arguments about which types of content are good, and which are not.

Thus, it is only from the position of a normative argument that the content of different kinds of publicities can be evaluated and either acknowledged as progressive, or counteracted as repressive or conservative of prevailing or future power structures. And if we should lack these forms of communication, we would not even be able to evaluate its content.

Notes:

1. All fanzine editors were interviewed at length twice during the study, with at least one year between interviews. These were taped and transcribed in full by myself. Some of my informants were interviewed more times. In addition to formal interviews I kept contact with them via letters and telephone, i.e. on the same terms as they communicated with each other. I also met several of them at other occasions than for taped interviews.

Representatives of the amateur video groups (who were more loosely organised around one or a couple of engaged 'leaders') were interviewed by me and Mark Comerford, who initially worked in the project. These interviews were also taped and transcribed in full by me. In addition to this material I have interviews with some of my informants in the press and radio, which I have used. Their products (i.e. the fanzines and amateur video films) are also part of the empiric material. I have also made interviews with friends of a couple of my informants, as well as with the parents of one of them.

For a more detailed description of the empiric material, as well as a more thorough discussion of method, see Bolin (1998).

2. This goes for Sweden, allegedly having the oldest national censorship in the world (from 1911), as well as for the US and, not least important to Habermas' view upon cinema, for Germany (cf. Altenloh 1914, 40f).

3. People's High School (Folkhögskola) is a typically Swedish/Nordic phenomenon, where people who for one reason or another have not entered — or dropped out of — the ordinary High School can 'repair' this loss.

4. Of course this could be relativised. A larger number of people probably got an opportunity to speak publicly through the rise of mass media as well, but seen in relation between the people spoken to and the people speaking, the gap can be argued to have widened.

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