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Introduction: From the Small Screen to the Big Picture

Something very peculiar has happened to the end credits of television programmes in the UK. 'Where once they were slow-paced and full screen, increasingly end credits are being shrunk, split, sidelined and confined to boxes or speeded up to the point of being almost illegible.'¹ This comment comes from an article in the New Media section within the Media supplement of the *Guardian* newspaper. Such divisions and subdivisions of 'news' are typical of the dominant daily organs for the distribution of information concerning current events and trends. It is inconceivable, within such media practices, that there might be a relationship worth exploring between such a seemingly specialist topic or relatively trivial item as end credits and some larger more substantive world events. Yet is there a relationship between our *Guardian* news item and some of the events which unfold, with rather minimal analysis, on the nightly television news? What possible relationship could exist between this shrinking, splitting and boxing of end credits on the one hand and mass revolts against the imposition of International Monetary Fund policies (obsequiously followed by national politicians) in a modern metropolitan capital such as Argentina's Buenos Aires? How could it be that this shrinking, splitting and boxing is related in any way whatsoever to the West dropping bombs on this or that part of the developing world? Surely there is no connection between the peculiar fate of end credits and the slow state-sanctioned privatisation of public services such as transport, health and education in the UK? Could there be a connection between such a marginal aspect of our experience of the media and the structures of the media themselves? And is there anything linking all this to the forms and content of the media and the meanings they generate? Perhaps, like Neo in *The Matrix* (Andy and Larry Wachowski 1999 US), you are aware that the world is not quite right, but the reasons for why it is wrong do not disclose themselves in how the world appears. But where to begin sifting, sorting, analysing the bewildering complexity of events, processes, and debates?

As students of the media, we could do worse than start with our lead story. Those end credits. The problem you see is that the nature

of television's airtime has altered in recent years. Previously there was no problem in having the end credits, which register the involvement and roles of the people who made the product you have just watched, scroll past at a leisurely pace with the screen all to themselves. Today the ferocious competition for audiences between broadcasters (however they are funded) means that the end credits must now vie with promotions and announcements designed to keep the viewer watching their channel. This ferocious competition did not develop naturally within the television industry, but was carefully promoted and institutionalised by the state and corporate agents. Airtime now has an economic value which it never had previously. For something to become valuable for some people, it has to be made scarce for others. Once upon a time scarcity afflicted human kind because nature imposed certain limitations and visited certain cruelties upon us. We lacked the basic means by which to overcome these limitations and afflictions. Then, along came a new social and economic system, which gradually developed and matured and promised to conquer scarcity and provide food, health, material wealth and cultural riches never before obtained. Some of these promises were indeed delivered, although patchily, unequally and often in stunted and limited ways. For many, these promises were never delivered. This social and economic system, which came to be known as capitalism, did not in fact abolish scarcity. Rather, it introduced new forms of scarcity, scarcity that was artificially, or socially *designed*. Time is money, they say. And this is another way of saying that time has become a scarce resource. A value. So time is now so valuable on television, that broadcasters are toying with the idea of displacing the end credits altogether and relocating them on the Internet. This erasure of the labour that has produced the television programme has not best pleased the industry trade unions. In America, the idea was fledged by the Discovery channel only to be shot down by the Documentary Credits Coalition, which represented various filmmakers' organisations. Our newspaper report notes: 'Such was the backlash that Discovery was branded as "greedy" and "un-American" in the US press, a reaction that seems to have frozen management on both sides of the Atlantic.'² The logic of competition and the drive to accumulate audiences and therefore profits from the advertisers (or sustain audience share if publicly funded) are thus resisted, which indicates one important facet of the social and economic system. It does not go unchallenged. The fact that this resistance has been supported by the American press, a capitalist

press funded by advertisers, calling the television industry 'greedy' points to another facet: the social and economic scene is full of contradictions, with individual and collective agents espousing values at one level that are contradicted by their practices at another. We should also note that the internationalisation of commercialisation very often takes the route implied here: exported from America, onto Britain, and then the rest of the world. Our own newspaper article is rather keener on the idea of relocating end credits, judging by the many quotes from industry sources supporting the idea which pepper the article. One commentator suggests that 'There's no evidence to suggest that consumers are that interested in them.' There is, on the other hand, plenty of evidence that audiences get irritated and frustrated with adverts. Of course, that kind of consumer response is not something the industry wants to do anything about since that would threaten its very existence.

Now you may understandably be unmoved by all this and feel that it is hardly a matter of life and death to have an opinion either way. The point, however, is to imagine what a world would look like if it was organised entirely around such principles as artificial scarcity, competition for profits, the marginalisation of labour, the use of new technology to 'solve' problems in a way that is beneficial to capital and so forth. Of course you do not have to have a BA in Imagination Studies to do this because this is in fact the world we live in. The penetration of the forces of capital into every area of our lives, every interaction we have, extends all the way from those end credits to wars over oil supplies (another resource which has become scarce within the social and economic relations of capitalism where there are monopoly providers with built-in vested interests slowing research into renewable sources of energy). The forces of capital stretch all the way through the changing corporate structures of the media, the role of the state, the use of new technology and the cultural forms and meanings the media generates. These forces are contradictory, riddled with surprise twists and turns and meet, to varying degrees and at varying levels of intensity and strength, resistance and counter-forces.

It is this narrative, of a newly unrestrained capitalism, restructuring itself and the world it is embedded into (including our own sense of self and identity), on the one hand, and the practical and theoretical forces of resistance on the other, which this book tries to portray amongst contemporary trends as they are filtered through

the media. The key concepts that will be our guide, our compass, derive from Marxism.

Marxism is rather more than a methodology for studying the media. It is a political, social, economic and philosophical critique of capitalism that has been much fought over, contested and condemned ever since a nineteenth-century German bloke with a big beard developed it out of a synthesis of French radical politics, German idealist philosophy and British economic analysis. As a critique it has predictably received a bad, begrudging or caricatured press from those who feel that there is no going beyond our present social and economic system. It has also been severely damaged by the track record of those who have acquired power and proclaimed themselves Marxists of one persuasion or another. Even though this track record had its Marxist critics it was the pro-capitalist bourgeois critics who got the most exposure.

Marxism in the West had its high point in academia back in the 1960s and 1970s, riding on the crest of a wave of political radicalisation throughout the developing and Western world. Today, within the study of culture and media, it is at best often gestured to as part of a history of methods, whose main themes, concerns and approaches have now been surpassed with infinitely more sophisticated tools of analysis. There are signs that this is beginning to change, perhaps because people are recognising that, as Fredric Jameson once noted, 'attempts to "go beyond" Marxism typically end by reinventing older pre-Marxist positions' (Jameson 1988:196). This book is written in the hope that there are people out there studying the media who are increasingly looking for more radical approaches to their subject, searching that is for ways of making sense of the media and culture which really get to the roots of why things are as they are.

Marxism I believe is the best methodology we have to begin to do that. It does not by any means have all the answers and it is in any case a field of dispute between Marxists. Yet as a set of tools it has enormous durability, with the world today looking more recognisably like that described by Marx in *The Communist Manifesto* than it did in 1848, when the *Manifesto* was first penned. This book is not organised as a history of Marxist thought, but is instead more of an intervention into contemporary trends, drawing on and elucidating Marxian concepts in the expectation that they will help us understand media culture in the context of advanced capitalism. I have tried to explain and apply these concepts as lucidly as possible

without sacrificing their complexity. The latter is particularly important, as opponents of Marxism are quick to dismiss it as being 'too simple'. In some ways capitalism is incredibly and brutally simple. In others, it is immensely complex and Marx devoted his entire adult life to developing the means to analyse and understand its historic significance for the human race.

In integrating an exposition of key Marxist concepts with an analysis of the media, this book moves, broadly speaking, from a discussion of the contextual determinants at work on media practices and structures, to the more textual concerns of media meanings and finally onto more philosophical issues to do with the nature and fate of consciousness and knowledge under capitalism. In some chapters, a variety of different media are drawn on to illustrate the conceptual issues at hand, but, in most, there is a clear emphasis on grounding the discussion in particular media as case studies. The Internet and digital technology and culture are discussed in Chapters 1 and 2. Hollywood's media-industrial complex dominates Chapter 3. UK television is a frequent point of reference in Chapter 4. Television again features in Chapter 5, with a case study of the international phenomenon known as *Big Brother*. The print media are centre stage in Chapter 6, Hollywood film in Chapter 7 and the documentary in Chapter 8. Nowhere do these chapters intend to offer histories of those different media. Instead, in a reciprocal dynamic, the hope is that I demonstrate the explanatory power of Marxism by analysing contemporary media practices and that, in turn, the media (and the questions they raise) will clarify, sharpen and question Marxian concepts. The various chapters also necessarily engage with and critique alternative non-Marxian and quasi-Marxian positions within the field while simultaneously, where appropriate, using those other positions to illuminate the blind spots within Marxism. Because the methods we choose to understand the world have an impact on how the world changes, the questions of which tools are deployed and how remain unavoidably political. This book is a contribution to putting Marxism squarely back on the agenda for the study of media and culture.

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