

Television, Critique, and the Intentionless

Amy Villarejo

... the lost pleasure of images is too high a price to pay for the benefit of forever transforming mourning into knowledge.

Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image*

Benjamin's writings are an attempt in ever new ways to make philosophically fruitful what has not yet been foreclosed by great intentions. The task he bequeathed was not to abandon such an attempt to the estranging enigmas of thought alone, but to bring the intentionless within the realm of concepts: the obligation to think at the same time dialectically and undialectically.

T.W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*

What has become of the tasks that once fell to a critique of images? This short essay takes up a very specific moment in the history of television, the late 1970s and the "open access" policies that made possible *from within the BBC* a multi-layered critique of racism on British television. It should also be said, and emphatically, that the very same moment made it possible for extreme right-wing racist groups to gain BBC airtime, and so what we're faced with is the difficult task of understanding the shifting ground of cultural authority. Through the 1979 half-hour program *It Ain't Half Racist, Mum* (anchored by the late Stuart Hall in one of his many television appearances), I want to explore the consequences of the abandonment of this kind of ideology critique by media theory. The program enacts the very mode of demythologization elaborated theoretically by television scholars/activists in the Birmingham school: its form is the very fantasy of "speaking back" to powerful images, transforming the pain of images, as it were, into knowledge. It is also a breathtaking indictment of that same process.¹

In his writings, Jacques Rancière proposes to redress the very kind of tension the program performs, a tension between semiotics and immediate affect, through dialectical treatment of three arenas that interact under the domain of "images": the social production of resemblances, the artistic operations of dissemblance, and the discursiveness of symptoms. One might agree that he is particularly successful in doing so within the field of art, say in *The Future of the Image* and elsewhere, but what of the "intentionless," that domain of the everyday, of the minimal, of the banal, and of the habitual that Adorno praises Benjamin for addressing in ever new ways, sometimes also undialectically? In addressing this question—whether one wants to call it a question of mass culture or of everyday life—I am seeking to contribute to the crucial conversation in which we wrestle with theoretical and political legacies that may seem to have outlasted their effectiveness (such as ideology critique) but whose abandonment leaves us with pale alternatives. In so doing, I hope also to contribute to the ongoing project of honoring the memory of Stuart Hall, who died in February of 2014

(and who has been commemorated in many tributes, including a recent volume entitled *Stuart Hall: Aktivismus, Pop, und Politik*²).

Let me outline the moment of *It Ain't Half Racist, Mum*. By 1979, Stuart Hall had been a public figure and talking head in BBC media (both radio and television) for two decades, speaking on the many subjects we associate with his work: youth culture, racism, public policy, violence, identity, hybridity, multiculturalism, pop culture, film, photography, and media, to name a few. For just as long, he had been a spokesperson for Britain's New Left and associated social movements (including the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament), as well as a founding scholar/editor of one of the Left's key publications, *New Left Review*. Hall's own racial consciousness had come of age in the 1960s, when he solidified his accumulated sense of himself as "black" as a *political* identification with movements for civil rights in the States and with decolonization across the global South; throughout his life, he had simultaneously described a profound sense of unbelonging, both to his native Jamaica and to his adopted Britain. Even in his identification as Black, as a result of this unsettled feeling, Hall insisted upon a constitutive incommensurability at the heart of identification, in which a layered, triangular formation of "who we are," "cultural meanings ascribed to us," and "the values by which we live" are never translatable but rather always in sometimes agonizing tension.

At the heart of *this* understanding of race as unstable identity is also, importantly, a question about abstraction. Especially in the wake of racial crises and riots in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Hall had indicted a *racist* strategy of British ideology that involved the abstraction of race as a question *external* to British sociality and politics, rather than, as Hall insisted, understanding race as internal, rooted in a specific moment and formation, intrinsic to British society and its institutions. To do so, as most readers will well know, Hall elaborated a schema we now think of as a "cultural studies" approach, at once a set of assumptions about what matters in approaching cultural phenomena, including racist media, and in turn a feel for how to work the field of abstractions to balance thought and passion, or, as Hall's beloved Antonio Gramsci put it, to calibrate "pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will." That schema might be said to include the following:

- an insistence upon the everyday, lived experiences of social categories;
- a sense that history is never consigned to the past; and likewise
- a conviction that the new is never a break with the past;
- a strong interdependence stressed between individual and collective life;
- and, an integration of media theory with media practice, speaking directly to mass cultural texts and interests.

The project, then, of *It Ain't Half Racist, Mum*, becomes, as Hall puts it, "to make the media, for once, 'speak' against the media's dominant practice, and thus reveal something about how they normally function." It's dialectical cultural studies for the masses, and it's on the very television it critiques. To return to Benjamin and zoom outward, this might be equivalent to the task of bringing the intentionless within the realm of concepts. What is the relationship of this task to ideology critique, and of what sort?

Produced by the Campaign Against Racist Media (CARM), *It Ain't Half Racist* is initially structured to highlight its function of talking back, as talking heads, to dominant programming. It was the 161st access offering of the *Open Door* program, but it was, according to co-writer and co-producer Carl Gardner, “the first programme to address itself critically to television itself, and to the BBC in particular. It was also the first programme made largely by people who work in and around television.”³ Featuring Hall and his co-host, actress Maggie Steed (known for her appearances in British theatre, cinema and television to this day), the program isolates Hall and Steed as almost disembodied talking heads in a blackbox studio setting. Gardner’s notes on the production reveal that the program’s budget went almost entirely to transferring to film the racist sit-com clips that open the show; as a result, the makers were driven quickly into the studio, “almost against our will.” Interspersing clips with their commentary highlights the assertion of their authority, as these commentators question, and ask the viewers to question, the effects of racist programming on everyday understandings, common sense understandings, of racial tension and violence. The program interestingly begins with a critique of the embodied voice, in which Malcolm Muggeridge interviews Lord John Reith, the founding father of the BBC. Here is the exchange:

Muggeridge: ...the point, in terms of social history, is that this accent, which the BBC produced, somehow identified the BBC with a certain section of society, certain social trends, so that to this day, the BBC is thought of as the organ of the, as it were, genteel and respectable elements in society.

Reith: Anything wrong with that?

Here in the interview with Lord Reith, it’s Muggeridge who personifies what now sounds almost like a caricature of RP, or “received pronunciation,” an accent often linked to, if not conflated with, what’s often in turn called BBC English. [As a friend of mine recently put it, it’s an accent that can get you beat up.] Hall and Steed allow the indictment to function implicitly, letting Lord Reith in effect hang himself by seeing nothing wrong in the BBC’s affiliation with “the genteel and respectable elements in society.” “Anything wrong with that?” he asks, in what became a much-mocked Reithian tone of absolute confidence. What is conceptually at stake in this opening is at once both quite specific and quite general. On the one hand, the program contradictorily locates the politics of speech in the transition, as it were, from the classes to the masses, using the RP accent to stand in for the exclusionary class structure, privilege, whiteness, and so on associated with the institution of the BBC, even while Steed herself speaks close to RP and is a trained actor. [In the 1970s, roughly 3% of British people spoke in RP.] On the other hand, and at the same time, this interview *stages* the crucial questions of mass culture the subsequent program will address. It alleges that, rather than being impartial and balanced and democratic (the exalted values upon which the BBC television service was founded in 1936), the BBC’s interest is now, forty-odd years later, tied to class and racial privilege, the *effect* of which is to enunciate and endorse racist perspectives. At the heart of British culture, Hall and Steed find not just bias, but institutionalized racism. It’s in the mouth, in the throat, in the training of the televisual face.

No wonder the BBC was nervous. It withheld permission to use their archives for the program and saw it as an affront to the liberal consensus (which it in fact was). Still, as Sarita Malik has argued, programs such as *It Ain't Half Racist*, *Mum* were not guaranteed to succeed in institutional critique, since audiences had been steeped in racist media attitudes:

Such is the power and effect of the dominant consensus constructed by popular representations of race, that even those programmes designed to dismantle ‘untruths’ are often subsequently perceived as untruthful themselves because they are seen to work against the grain and outside the inter-textual framework of mainstream common sense.⁴

This is the struggle of definition and perception we witness over the course of the program’s half hour, a struggle I now want to parse further in order to get closer to what I have been variously referring to as institutional critique, ideology critique, and “talking back” to mass media.

The most mechanistic forms of ideology critique today are cringe-inducing: demonstrating errors, exposing bias, de-mystifying quasi-universalist claims, and revealing ruling-class or racial interest, to name a few. What we learn by watching these modes in action is that it’s actually the *form* of the critique that rankles, a form here represented by these talking heads talking back. In the program’s second sequence, in looking at stereotypes of South Asian characters in comedy shows, Hall and Steed have to embody a knowing authority that functions as disciplinary, and, through the parallel editing of the slightly funny and embarrassingly stock comedic footage with these talking heads, they bear the burden of our own derision, ridicule, or dismissal. Hall explains, for example, that viewers “may think it’s a good thing that the British are able to laugh at their own past, but the British Empire was no joke for those on the receiving end.” Hall and Steed can appear haughty, self-satisfied, and even vaguely sinister as they provide voice-over demythologization of media stereotypes and a corrective, righteous version of history.

When the media *itself* is made complicit with the position of critique through a different editing strategy (one I’m tempted to say is both dialectical and undialectical), however, we are led toward a much more sympathetic, indeed enduring response. The showpiece of *It Ain’t Half Racist, Mum* is a montage sequence featuring Enoch Powell, the conservative MP who infamously incited and condoned racial hatred in a 1968 speech, known as the “Rivers of Blood” speech, producing heated debates about immigration and racial politics. Initially shot for a prestige BBC program entitled *Question of Immigration*, the montage incorporated into *It Ain’t Half Racist, Mum*, as media scholar John Gabriel explains,

...clearly showed how the debate was framed almost entirely around Powell’s arguments and how participants were invited, cajoled, and in some cases harassed into responding in the terms set by Powell and the chairperson, Robin Day.⁵

Through editing, that is, television reveals its own structures of control and power. The re-edit of the interview, emphasizing over and over the authoritative resonance of the name “Mr. Powell” and the links between “numbers,” “re-patriation,” and “immigration,” reveals the very logic of what the BBC otherwise represses as a structuring logic of its programming. That logic, as Hall puts it, is this: “immigrants=blacks=too many of them=send them home.”⁶

Although Hall’s voice minimally guides the footage, it is the repetition that does the work of critique *within* the very programming, without relying on exterior commentary or authority.

We feel what it feels to be shut down, silenced, marginalized, forced. When Hall resumes his commentary at his desk, he notices that the talk of numbers and repatriation plays directly into the hands of extreme racist groups, who argue for forced repatriation, or deportation. And here the discourse again shifts: Hall discusses the increased air time given to these extreme racist groups by the BBC, in what is clearly a shift in policy. Where once the BBC declared that it could not be “neutral” in the choice between racism and anti-racism, now the chairman, Sir Michael Swan, believes that it is not only possible but necessary to display the rhetoric of the National Front and related hate groups, as “respectable studio chat.”

Once we return to Hall and Steed as talking heads, though, once the smirks return and the disparaging dismissals continue, the task of critique as *détournement*, as a structural analysis, as a formal intervention into televisual logic, has all but been abandoned. To retrieve these practices as openings, ways of enlisting attention and consent: this remains our critical task. How to proceed? This essay was sparked by a mode of historicizing British television that continues to look to the brief heyday of Channel 4 (from its founding in 1982 to roughly a decade later) for the politically savvy, anti-racist, queer-positive, and intellectually hip sounds and images of the 1980s. One result of this nostalgia for the way things never were is that we miss experiments such as *It Ain't Half Racist, Mum*, where forms of critique had to be articulated from within the belly of the BBC beast rather from presumed external (and politically guaranteed) formations. For Hall, nothing, not even cherished genealogies of Marxism, came with guarantees.⁷ To work the crevices of critique wherever and with whomever it might gain traction: this was the task not only of the *Open Door* series but of other BBC broadcasts of the 1980s in which we witness Hall's important commitments to everyday habits, a complicated relationship between past and present, and a *practice* of critique combined with a conceptual analysis of conjuncture. We abandon them at our peril.

Amy Villarejo is professor in the Department of Performing and Media Arts at Cornell University. She is the author of a number of books in cinema and media studies, the most recent of which are Ethereal Queer: Television, Historicity, Desire (Duke University Press, 2014) and the co-authored Film Studies: A Global Introduction (Routledge, 2015).

Notes

¹ My thanks to Alfred Guzzetti for mentioning the program to me.

² Edited by Dagmar Brunow (Ventil Verlag, 2014).

³ Carl Gardner, “It Ain’t Half a Hot Potato, Mum,” in *It Ain’t Half Racist, Mum: Fighting Racism in the Media*, eds. Phil Cohen and Carl Gardner, with assistance from Geoff Sheridan, Tony Freeth, and Mike Flood-Page (London: Comedia Publishing Group, 1982), 85.

⁴ Sarita Malik, *Representing Black Britain: Black and Asian Images on Television* (London: Sage Publications, 2001), 50.

⁵ John Gabriel, *Racism, Culture, Markets* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 36.

⁶ Cited in Malik, p. 46.

⁷ Stuart Hall, “The Problem of Ideology: Marxism Without Guarantees,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* (June 1986), vol. 10, no. 2: 28-44.