From Variety Shows to Body-Sculpting Commercials: Figures of Audience and the Sexualization of Women/Girls

Irene Fang-chih Yang

In recent years, two events have caught the attention of the public in Taiwan, both revolving around the role of media and their effects on teenagers and children. The first media event concerns the indecent content in TV variety shows; the second, a controversial TV commercial using a young girl to promote body-sculpting products. I want to use these two events as points of intervention. First, as the terms of the debate regarding these two events are framed within the passive/active dichotomy regarding the role of audience, I want to highlight how these two figures of audience are produced out of particular conjunctural and epistemological constraints. This focus on the politics of knowledge production enables us to understand how “audience” is used for certain purposes; and intellectuals, in producing these figures, need to be aware of the effects of their articulation of “the other.” Second, as the debate is caught between two opposite interpretations of the phenomenon of female sexualization in popular media, I attempt to offer a new line of reading variety shows, through an engagement with the gendered public sphere, in envisioning an alternative space for feminism. I argue that feminists need to expose male physicality in problematizing the “abstract(ed)” male public sphere (Deem, 1996: 512), and variety shows offer such a possibility. However, this reading should be accompanied by a critique of the class/gender politics involved in drawing the boundary between high and low culture.

To achieve these ends, I will first introduce the two events; second, I will discuss the figures of audience produced among public intellectuals in their
response to the events; then I move on to a discussion of the conjunctural and epistemological constraints which condition the production of audience. Finally, I come back to the debates and further engage with the issues raised in these two media events in order to situate the “avenue of escape” that I propose. Naming these two cultural debates on media effects as “events” is to highlight the “multiplicities of ‘historical determinations, concepts, individuals, groups, social formation,’ all of which coexist ‘on a single page, the same sheet.’” Using Deleuze, Probyn points out that “[e]vent” in this way therefore compels us to think about the conjugation of forces: individuals, concepts and theories that at any time enfold the past within the present, constraining or enabling action” (Probyn, 2000: 48–9). Hence, in conceptualizing these two media debates as “events,” I want to put an emphasis on the explication of how relations of the past, present, and future are designated and conjugated, especially with regard to how the forces outside as well as inside the academic field conjugate in the figures of the audience. Let me now turn to the first event, the moral panic created around variety shows.

**Media Event I: Variety Shows**

Since 1997, media celebrities, cultural critics, media scholars, and feminists have begun to construct a moral panic around variety shows, targeting Jacky Wu, the most popular variety-show host, for bringing about the nation’s moral decay, and therefore to call for state censorship. The pivotal moment in framing this panic occurred when the famous news anchor, Lee Yan-chiu, in May 2000 accused Jacky Wu of corrupting our teenagers’ morality. Identifying herself as a mother who spoke for all mothers of the nation, Lee’s accusation was passionately endorsed by mainstream media and media critics. Many criticisms centered around two themes. First, the sex and violence scenes in variety shows have corrupted our children and teenagers. Criticisms such as these abound in news magazines, electronic news, and print news: “save our children” (Feng, 2000); “give our children more educational variety shows, not shows that contain sex and violence” (Jiang, 2000); and “Our TV programs . . . have ruined our next generation and have created a lot of social problems. Faced with the increasing juvenile crime and social ills, can we afford not to supervise our media?” (“Special Report,” 2000). The other focus concerns how variety shows objectify women and how the show-hosts sexually harass and hence traumatize female guests/entertainers and girls. For example, “In order to raise
From Variety Shows to Body-Sculpting Commercials

the ratings, variety shows have used voyeurism as their selling point. They not only use the camera to forefront young girls' breasts and lower body parts, but also make sexist comments on their bodies” (Chang, 2000).

This wave of attacks on variety shows led to state intervention as well as the transformation of the variety genre itself. Faced with criticisms from all sides, the Information Bureau took action to censor many shows, including the cancellation of “Taiwan Red” (Taiwan Hung Bu Rang). The government also penalized “a truckload of variety shows” for featuring “inappropriate” material (“Information Bureau,” 2000). In addition, the five major networks responded to this wave of criticism by forming the “Self-censorship on TV Production Treaty.” Some variety-show producers took the side of the moral majority and claimed to make “healthy shows” for our teenagers. In doing so, they replace the older host-centered shows with shows featuring many younger, “innocent-looking” teenagers as hosts (Yang, 2002).

Media Event II: Body-Sculpting Commercials

In the wave of attacks on variety shows, the Awakening Group (the leading feminist activist group in Taiwan) held a workshop, inviting media scholars, feminists, state legislators, graduate students, and variety-show producers to evaluate/supervise variety shows. Though a consensus was largely forged among these critics in condemning variety shows, one feminist speaker at the workshop, Josephine Ho, spoke against the consensus. She pointed out that the audience was not as passive as the mainstream critics assumed, and that the moral discourse launched against variety shows should be read as a matter of class bias. Moreover, the exposure of sexual matters and sexual minorities in variety shows opened up possibilities for society to change its conservative attitude toward sex. Despite this alternative viewpoint, which, according to workshop participants, gained much popularity, this viewpoint did not make much of an inroad into public debate.

When a body-sculpting commercial, entitled “Jin-Hua's secret for making herself look like a child again” (Jinhua de mimi – huan lao huan tung shu), featured a 14-year-old girl as its main protagonist, China Times published an article on “Childlike Women and Stupid Men? – Should Children be the Spokespersons for Body-Sculpting Products?” (Chang & Huang, 2000). This article triggered a cultural war and the terms of the debate also took up the issues left from the debate on variety shows. On
Irene Fang-chih Yang

one side of the debate, notions of exploitation (of young girls), male voyeurism, girl victimization, and adult male pleasure are highlighted. In emphasizing these notions, critics also foreground the power of media, operated through the logic of patriarchal capitalism, in setting up norms of beauty which have adverse effects on both teenage girls and old women. On the other side of the debate, notions of agency, resistance, appropriation, and bricolage are accentuated. Teenagers are seen to appropriate consumer products as a way of making their bodies sexy—a process of self-formation that coincides with the rise of modernity.2

Figures of Audience

Two types of audience figure in these debates on media effects. The first figure constructs the audience as passive (male) children/teenagers or TV zombies, while the second figures the audience as active, possibly sexually deviant, (male) teenagers who fight against the establishment. Allor (1996) contends that the notion of audience as passive/active should be conceptualized as a general, unified, abstract theory which is created within certain conjunctural and epistemological constraints. Seiter (1996) further argues that, as discursive constructs, how the audience is utilized and talked about produces material effects and therefore should be analyzed within the field of social effectivities. I argue that the first figure is created, circulated, and legitimated in public discourses to create a moral panic around variety shows as a form of ideological displacement, and this displacement uses gender civility as its organizing rhetoric to forge a national consensus around a class-based moral order. The second figure is produced and distributed among a certain section of intellectuals to create and legitimate a "new" and "liberated" transnational subject of consumption (of Western scholarship). I will now turn to the first figuration of the audience.

We as a society are much concerned about the sensational, controversial TV programs in Taiwan; in particular, we believe that the worst kind is to be found in our variety shows. Their taste for indecency has gone out of control. Some of its audience might argue that television is for entertainment only, there is nothing serious about this. However, television programs play a central role in our popular culture. In contemporary society, the monstrous TV is used as a babysitter and a learning machine for our children and teenagers; it plays an important role in shaping the values and the behavior of our children and teenagers. (Editorial, June 2, 2000)
From Variety Shows to Body-Sculpting Commercials

Variety shows are full of "young beauties" and "spice girls." They are all in their teens, wearing bikinis or tight clothes, revealing their bodies in public. The male hosts investigate the girls' bodies as if they are weighing up a piece of meat in the market. Worse yet, the camera crudely exploits and invades their bodies by making their breasts and buttocks the center of attention. (Wu, 1999)

The audience figure here is a child or a teenager, usually male, who consumes variety shows that feature "sexually deviant" material (enacted through the body of girls) and who therefore is facing the danger of becoming a bad future citizen. The essence of the nation here is constructed through the rhetoric of gender civility, and variety shows are constructed as threats to the nation because of their gender incivility. In constructing male children and teenagers as the audience-subject and exploited girls as the object of consumption, a moral panic is framed within the boundary of gender and nation.

Tavener (2000) points out that historically the creation of the division of high/low culture has helped to denigrate low/popular culture and to "authenticate the middle class moral order." (In)civility is at the heart of class struggle and should be conceptualized as the expression of an "important fury at corroded leader-class values and standards" and a "flat-out rejection of leader-class claims of respect" (Demott, quoted in Tavener, 2000: 67). Precisely because civility functions as class distinction, incivility in the public sphere should therefore be seen as a form of resistance against bourgeois decorum and popular media/talk shows, one of the very few public outlets available for the working class, outlets offering a space for the expression of their voices. Seen in this light, feminists' and mainstream critics' attacks on variety shows as violating gender civility can be seen as maintaining a class-based moral order.

It is here I want to address the second figure of the audience. In pointing out the class bias in the moral critique of variety shows, Ho (2000) argues that the audience is not as passive as the mainstream critics assume, and that instead one should see the audience as active. Ka Wei-bou further elaborates this notion of an active audience in his analysis of the body-sculpting commercial. In arguing against the disappearance of teenagers (in the sense that adults speak for and about them), Ka contends:

Within the global communication network, our teenagers today can borrow cultural and desiring codes from London or Shinjuku as resources for their self- and body-formation. This [commodified] body can be used to fight against the disciplinary body that our education system and parents try to
shape. It is within the space created through the conflicts and struggles between the commodified body and the disciplinary body that teenagers can exercise their own autonomy. In other words, the trend toward the fashioning and sexualization of the body is an effort made by teenagers to search for their autonomous selves. These images of commodified, sexualized bodies may be said to be another form of discipline, but teenagers are using their commodified body to fight against the sexual repression/conservatism that their teachers and parents impose on them. And their autonomy expands within this conflictual space. (Ka, 2001a and b: 23)

Drawing from Western cultural-studies scholars such as Mica Nava, Dick Hebdige, John Fisk, and Paul Willis, Ka argues that sites of consumption of transnational commodities should be seen as sites of empowerment, points where teenagers can exercise their agency. Identifying himself as a "young and wise" (qing chun rei zhi) radical sexual liberationist, Ka contends that feminists who disapprove of the eroticization (which is articulated as exploitation by many feminists and leftists) of girls in popular media “lag behind cultural studies scholarship by twenty years” (2001b: 12). In doing so, he relegates these feminists and critics to the realm of tradition, as expressed through his derogatory use of the term “aging feminists.”

As mapped out, the construction of the audience as passive/active in these two debates is articulated to other vectors, including gender, sexuality, nation formation, moral order, class, and consumerism. In the debates, feminists are caught in an either/or dilemma. On the one hand, if one stands against variety shows, then one is accused of engaging with the practice of class distinction/formation by excluding the working class and sexual minorities from participating in the public sphere in the name of morality. On the other hand, if one sides with variety shows, one ignores the role media play in the formation of gendered subjectivities as well as the problem of consumerism promulgated by transnational capitalism. How do feminists get out of this trap? How do we create other avenues? Here, I want to work through the figure of the audience again in order to address the conjunctural and epistemological constraints which ensnare Taiwanese feminists in this double bind.

Similar to the audience as figured in the United States, Allor (1996) argues that constructions of the audience as passive or active underline public discourses about relations between media and the people. The first figure conceptualizes the audience as situated at “the end point and guarantee of the stability (or instability) of the citizenry or the social itself.” The second figure frames the relationship between people and media as
From Variety Shows to Body-Sculpting Commercials

"enacted practice and experience" (1996: 211). However, "we produce these figures (these concepts) within epistemological regimes that condition the ways in which we structure the engagement between concepts and empirical analyses. Our work, then, is conditioned by the more general discourses enacting the audience (representation and enacted agency) and by the specific logic of enquiry and interpretive rules of particular research traditions" (ibid.). As our work is always conditioned by the double set of determinations – conjunctural and epistemological – it is important to map out these conditions and see how the audience figures are produced within these constraints.

Conjunctural Conditions in the Production of Audience Figurations

I identify two vectors of convergence at this historical moment which condition the production of the figure of the passive audience: the first vector concerns the production of a media crisis, thereby calling for media reform; the second involves the liberalization/globalization of TV, which has changed the local environment for media production. The production of a media crisis has to be situated within Taiwanese democratic movements, the rise of media-watch groups, and the joining of the WTO in 2002. The rise of television in Taiwan as a commercial system is inseparable from its political history. When the KMT party took over Taiwan, they immediately saw media, particularly television, as an ideological tool for political mobilization. Consequently, the three major networks, TTV, CTV, and CTS, set up in the early 1960s and early 1970s, were owned by the provincial government, the KMT party, and the military. While these three networks took the form of commercial TV, the board of directors and the major positions in the networks were all appointed by the KMT government and were all senior KMT members. With ownership controlled by the KMT party and the censorship of any speech that endangered "national" security (read as the security of the KMT party), it was very difficult for the opposition party to survive. Hence, "Removing the KMT party, the provincial government, and the military from the three networks" (dang zheng jun tui chu san tai) became one of the main concerns for the oppositional party and an important agenda in the democratic movements in the early 1990s. Approaching TV from the perspective of political economy, scholars from Cheng She (an organization) examined KMT involvement in the constitution of ownership and explored the relationships between ownership and
Irene Fang-chih Yang

control. The reports of these investigations have become foundational texts in calling for media reform.

In addition to the agenda to eliminate political influence in the current broadcasting system, the legalization/liberalization of cable TV in 1994, according to these scholars, has added rampant commercial influences to the existing problem, thereby contributing to the further deterioration of the public sphere. Believing that media should be a public forum, Cheng She, along with media scholars and cultural critics, endorsed the establishment in 1999 of MediaWatch, the first nongovernment-controlled media-watch group. Other media reform groups have also emerged, such as "Communication Students Fighting Alliance" (Chung bo xue sheng do zhen). Composed mainly of university students and professors, this campaigning alliance argued that TTV and CTS should be made public so as to eliminate political control and commercial influence.

The election of the first DPP president in March 2000 marked the success of Taiwan's democratic movements, ending 50 years of KMT rule. Before the election, some media scholars helped the DPP party to draft a white paper on media reform as part of their election campaign package. With the successful shift of power to the DPP party, media reformers saw a chance to push for their agenda. MediaWatch issued their first electronic newsletter immediately after the new government was elected, hoping to "protect freedom of speech, maintain media justice, promote media self-regulation, and guarantee people's right to know" (Editorial, April 28, 2000).

In addition to civil groups pushing for media reform, the new government also found itself in need of a communication policy, as it was preparing to join the WTO in 2002. At a conference called "2001 Communication Forum," sponsored by the Government Information Office, Premier Zhang Jun-hsuing declared that the conference's aim was to "produce information which helped the government to set up future communication policies in order to reshape a liberalized, nativized, and internationalized communication environment" (Liao, 2001). At the conference, media scholars discussed the necessity of meeting international standards if Taiwan were to survive the competition of joining the WTO: "Faced with the overflow of Japanese and Korean drama into Taiwan, Taiwan needs to upgrade its media programs in order to compete in the international environment . . . it is necessary to close the gap between nativization and globalization" (W. M. Lin, 2001).

The convergence of these forces made variety shows the target of a reform campaign. With the liberalization of cable TV in 1993, variety shows
From Variety Shows to Body-Sculpting Commercials

have become the “most local” shows made in Taiwan as well as the emblem of commercialism at its worst. These two dimensions of variety shows—local/low standard and rampant commercialism—typify the concerns of media reformers as well as the government’s impetus for media reform. In calling for media reform, public intellectuals used the images of teenagers and children as members of passive audience to address the devastating media effects. I will now turn to a more detailed analysis of the site of media production of variety shows in order to explain why the use of teenagers and children as figures for the audience makes particular sense at this historical moment.

The major change in the field of TV production was the legalization of cable TV in 1993. The first illegal cable service was documented in 1979, and by 1985 there were already 230,000 households receiving illegal cable service; by 1991 the number jumped to 540,000 households. Ninety percent of the programs broadcasted during this time were imported from Japan and the United States and their audiences were largely upper middle-class professionals (Feng, 1995). The legalization and privatization of cable services in 1993 did not change this situation; instead, it made Japanese programs and American programs more available and it further stratified the audience according to their economic value. According to the Broadcasting Law in Taiwan, cable TV is required to produce 25 percent and network TV 75 percent of local programs. As a result, many cable channels do not make their own programs, but show imported programs from other countries. Hence, in addition to “special” channels such as Discovery, National Geographic, CNN, and HBO, which feature American programs and Jet Wei-lai and Guo-Hsing channels which both broadcast Japanese programming, many “variety” channels also buy foreign-made programs because it is a lot cheaper than producing their own. Moreover, the audiences who watch these imported channels tend to be more valuable to the industry because of their socioeconomic status (Yang, 2002).

While there is a tendency for transnational communication conglomerates such as HBO to take over many of the Taiwanese cable channels, local channels such as Sunli have also proliferated as a result of the legalization of cable TV. The increase of local channels in cable TV brought about an increasing demand for locally produced shows; and because talk shows and variety shows are cheap to produce, there is a great demand for variety shows. However, the growing demand for these shows has also created tougher competition for commercial sponsorship. Moreover, with the invention of the remote control, which makes it more difficult to predict the audience’s loyalty, and the proliferation of different media such as the
internet, many advertisers have cut down their financial support for variety shows. The recent economic recession makes this problem worse. As a result, many producers have cut the budgets for variety shows.

The liberalization of cable TV also brought about a changing definition of audiences for variety shows. Before cable service, variety shows were conceptualized as family entertainment not only because of the use of TV as a domestic medium but also because variety shows were made for family viewing. As a result, the different segments of variety shows aimed to include as many topics as possible to encompass large audiences, while they were usually scheduled on weekend evenings. However, with the advent of cable also came the practice of niche marketing. Unlike serial dramas, which tend to imagine a regional, Mandarin-speaking audience, or HBO, which tends to imagine an international audience, variety shows, with their low-budget production, appeal to local audiences. Because of the stratification of audiences for different types of programs, Taiwanese variety shows find their niche in teenagers. But this doesn't mean that only teenagers watch variety shows. According to Broadcaster, variety-show audiences tend to be economically disadvantaged—they tend to be housewives with no income, the unemployed, teenagers, and old people. This also points out one aspect about TV viewing—that TV has become an entertainment for those who lack access to other leisure activities, such as KTV, karaoke TV, or playing with computers. In any case, among this socially and economically disadvantaged group, teenagers have come to be seen as the most desirable audience because of their relatively high spending power and their potential as future consumers. According to Advertising Magazine, children and teenagers in Taiwan possess the highest annual spending power in Asia, and their weekly allowance ranks third in Asia, next only to Hong Kong and Singapore. Hence it is no surprise that most of Taiwan's variety shows target teenagers as their audience (Yang, 2002).

The shift to teenagers and children as target consumers is not specific to TV or variety shows; the recent explosion of girls' magazines also indicates this trend. A brief look at Taiwan's daily news (both in print and electronic) demonstrates that teenagers are constructed as either consumers or delinquents. On the one hand, the media are dominated by "social" news such as how (male) teenagers (especially on motorbikes) kill innocent people, destroy cars, and rob stores; how they are caught by the police selling bootleg CDs, VCDs, and illegal drugs. On the other hand, in the economic, entertainment, and cultural editions, there is the rise of consumer information for teenagers, such as stories titled "New Department..."
From Variety Shows to Body-Sculpting Commercials

Stores Creating Special Sections for Teenagers” (2001); “You Can Enjoy the Hottest New Cell Phone for Only a Few Hundred Dollars per Month” (2001); and “When Hollywood Discovered Children’s Books” (2001). It is within this general shift in our culture towards viewing teenagers as both consumers and delinquents, as well as the polarization of a middle-class, transnational audience and a culturally and economically disadvantaged local audience, that variety shows emerge as the target of a moral panic. As I point out here, the creation of a moral panic through the use of media crisis (or ill effects) has the purpose of justifying a comprehensive media reform, with the aim not only of making TV a public sphere for training in and practicing of citizenship, but also to help the government cope with the effects of joining the WTO. I have so far mapped out the conjunctural vectors which condition the production of a moral panic and the figurations of the audience as teenagers and children who are victims of popular media. Despite the emphasis here in explicating the construction of the figure of the passive audience, it is necessary to call attention to the fact that the figure of the active audience – a teenager who is able to appropriate cultural commodities imported from London, Tokyo, and New York – should also be situated within the trend of current commercialism to locate teenagers/children as consumers. Now I will turn to the site of academic research and investigate the epistemological constraints which condition the production of the figures of the active and passive audiences.

Epistemological Constraints on the Production of Audiences

Engagements with relations between people and media can largely be located within Communication Studies and Cultural Studies in Taiwan. Of course, these two are not mutually exclusive; however, the debates on variety shows and body-sculpting commercials can be broadly mapped out as polarized into an argument between audience as active versus audience as passive, with communication scholars taking up the latter notion and cultural studies the former. I will discuss the current paradigms in these two fields, which condition the production of these two figures.

The institutionalization of communication studies in Taiwan is a response to the need of the industry in training people to use new communication technologies. Hence, within communication departments, the majority of the courses offered are for professional training. In an envi-
environment where the purpose of education is to produce results that are conducive to the development of the industry and the strengthening of state power, it is no wonder that communication research in Taiwan has been dominated by the positivist paradigm since the 1960s and the main concerns within this paradigm are audience research and mass-media studies (Xyu & Chen, 1996). Within the positivist paradigm, researchers tend to locate active audiences within an individualistic, psychological model, ignoring the context of audience consumption. Typical of this research is Su and Chen's (2000) article on "Global or Local? Research on Taiwanese Youth's Television Viewing Behavior." By asking the audience to fill out surveys, the authors aim to "explain the relationships between Taiwanese youth's television viewing, their motivations and attitudes" (Su & Chen, 2000). In addition, the notion of passive audiences also underpins this positivistic paradigm in studying media effects. The framing of research questions, such as "Exploring the Influence of Variety Shows' Use of Slang on Teenagers" (Chen, 2000), already assumes the power of media on teenagers.

The notion of a passive audience is also assumed in most of the critical feminist work in communication studies. As Good (1995) points out, with the influence of positivism on media studies, most research on women and media before the eighties did not engage with feminist criticism. In the 1980s, with the establishment of the Awakening Group, usually identified as the second-wave women's movement in Taiwan, some research began to recognize and discuss the inequality between men and women. However, because the research done in this era was still dominated by the positivist paradigm, issues of (patriarchal) power and ideology were elided. Before the lifting of martial law in 1987, the Awakening Group sporadically published articles that criticized media stereotyping of women. With the lifting of martial law, feminist movements gained much support, for they were recognized as part of the democratic reform in Taiwan. In addition to the growth and diversification of feminist movements in the early 1990s, women's studies centers were established to encourage research on women. Within media studies departments, under the influence of newly hired feminist media scholars, students began to use ideological analysis, semiotic analysis, and discourse analysis to investigate how women were represented and explored the ideological ramifications of female images in commercials, advertisements, and popular media texts (Good, 1995). This particular way of looking at media images and women was taken up in popular media as these students graduated to become journalists and editors. Consequently, the feminist language of female stereotypes/exploitation
From Variety Shows to Body-Sculpting Commercials

and the male gaze has become the vernacular in talking about gender inequality.

The translation of cultural studies into the Taiwanese academy in the late 1980s and 1990s does not have much impact on communication studies because the discipline is already deeply rooted in the positivist paradigm (Xyu & Chen, 1996). Despite sporadic articles on introducing and engaging with theories/concepts of audience within the global village, little work was done in the area of ethnographic audience studies. However, outside communications departments, cultural studies is growing rapidly, particularly in English and Sociology departments. However, as Liu (2000) points out, despite the proliferation of cultural studies and the institutionalization of cultural studies through the establishment of cultural studies centers and departments in the Taiwanese academy in the 1990s, most of the publications on cultural studies are “translations,” defined as translation/introduction/application of cultural studies theories produced in the West. As much as cultural studies is about intervention into particular contexts, not much work in this area engages with specifically Taiwanese contexts (except in the area of gender/sexuality studies). In the words of Liu, “there are a lot of translations of cultural studies work, but there is a lack of [local] cultural studies work” (2000: 14).

It is within this context that theories of the audience emerged out of particular locations and have become the received “truth” for some cultural-studies scholars in Taiwan. Within feminist cultural studies, the notion of an active audience arose as a response to: (1) use and gratification theory which individualizes the politics of media reception, (2) Marxist critical theory (especially that of the Frankfurt school), which assumes the audience to be passive and associates passivity with the feminine, and (3) Althusserian ideological analyses which take the audience to be passive recipients of dominant ideology. In the spirit of political intervention, feminist cultural-studies scholars such as Seiter, Radway, and Ang, use “ethnography” to investigate the context of audience reception. Their notion of an active audience is, however, an ambivalent one which should be seen only through its contextuality. However, when it is translated into Taiwan, as shown in Ka’s quote earlier on the figure of the active audience, the context disappears; instead, the audience as active becomes a general, abstract theory which is used for academic classification. Worse yet, cultural studies is constructed as a theory of the active audience and is used to argue against both the “backwardness” of feminist theory which criticizes the sexualization of young girls in the media, and Marxist class cri-
Irene Fang-chih Yang

tique which insists on problematizing consumer culture brought about by transnational capitalism:

With regard to the discussions on consumption, popular culture, and youth subculture, Cultural Studies have long ago disputed the elitist position inhabited by the Frankfurt School/critical theory. But recent mainstream media criticisms have totally neglected [the advances made in] contemporary Cultural Studies. They have simply used terms such as "capitalism/patriarchal structure/objectification/commodification/media brainwashing/commercial hypnosis" as big theories to criticize some new phenomena which threaten to disturb or change the status quo. . . . In fact, these mainstream media criticisms seem to just pick up some jargon and play with it, they have not caught up with any of the development in Cultural Studies within the past 10 to 20 years. (Ka, 2001b: 12)

This quote is quite revealing, for it points out one danger in Taiwan's academic standard—that we have to "catch up" with Western theories rather than produce our own, that the more in tune with Western theories we are, the more modern/advanced/substantive our work is. Within this environment, it is not surprising that the two debates about media and people are very much framed along the dichotomous axis of activity and passivity—a dichotomy produced within an administrative paradigm (with its roots in Enlightenment philosophy) which conceptualizes communication as a model of transmission (Carey, 1992). My mapping here of the dominant paradigm, shaped by positivist science, in Taiwanese communication departments, feminist ideological analyses of media images, and cultural studies aims to explain that the terms of the debate used in over-valuing or devaluing variety shows are framed within epistemological constraints imported/translated from the West. In unproblematically assuming the audience to be either passive or active, we lose sight of the context we are facing and the effects of our own critique. Now I will turn to the debate again and highlight the associated eviction of the politics of knowledge production.

Revisiting the Debate

As I point out, the figure of the passive audience is used to create a moral panic which justifies comprehensive media reform. Hall and Tavener contend that moral panics are ideological displacements. Moral panics are ideological frameworks that define the meaning and moral significance of
From Variety Shows to Body-Sculpting Commercials

conge events and behaviors; they “displace complex social issues of political importance onto the terrain of culture and attempt to resolve them through a discourse that attributes a moral dimension to culture” (Tavener, 2000: 68). What Hall (1978) and Tavener (2000) point out is that moral panics are sites of conflict—they are the sites in which material inequalities are implicated and masked, and in which hegemony is affirmed and secured. But in terms of the framing of moral panics on variety shows, what gets displaced and what gets proscribed as appropriate behavior? Likewise, what is gained and what is lost in articulating the figure of the active audience in countering this moral panic?

Hartley (1998) makes the argument that in adults’ panicking over the eroticization of girls in popular media, it is the girls’ interests that get elided. The attack on or defense of variety shows through the rhetoric of defending children’s and teenagers’ well-being produces similar effects of evicting their real interests. On one side of the debate, there is an emphasis on depicting popular media as having monstrous power over teenagers. If one reads this together with the image of teenagers as juvenile delinquents in daily news, a causal relation between the media and teenage crimes can be established; consequently, attention is shifted to media reform, but the structural problems which cause teenagers to commit crimes, such as unequal access to education, commodity culture, health information, and so on, are ignored. On the other side of the debate, Ho and Ka’s construction of teenagers as active as an attempt to address their agency not only matches capitalism’s need to incorporate teenagers and children into consumer groups but also elides structural inequalities which shape teenagers’ access to agency and mobility. In celebrating consumption as offering teenagers tools for exercising their agency, understood as their resistance against parents and school, issues of unequal access to commercial culture was discounted. Moreover, the relationship between teenagers and parental/school authority is essentialized as if there are no contradictions between the interests of the parents and the interests of the school authority, or no complicities between teenagers and parents/authority. In any case, both accounts ignore the fact that in the heat of their debate on media effects on teenagers and children in the name of defending their interests, the government, without making much noise in the media, passed a bill for a drastic cut in funding for children’s welfare programs (Luo, 2001).

Another key issue raised in the debates concerns the notion of the public sphere and its gender/sexuality/class implications. On the one hand, the sex and violence which characterize variety shows are seen by the media reformers as an exemplar of the public sphere’s contamination by com-
mercialism. On the other hand, the eroticization of girls’ bodies or women’s sexy bodies in variety shows is seen by some as opening up the public space to minority groups, including working-class and sexual minorities. Both arguments are predicated on the dichotomous notion of passive/active audiences.

These contradictory ways of interpreting the phenomenon of sexualization in popular media should be conceptualized within a contemporary capitalist-democratic system. This is a problem inherent in the definition of the public, a problem that has also haunted the British broadcasting system (the BBC) since its inception. The state sees media as a public space for the training of citizens through a model of cultural/moral cultivation; however, the norm of civility is class based. As a result, public TV, with its aim to serve all citizens, tends to lose its subject of cultivation (Hall, 1986). The contradiction between the ideal public and commercialism, between the norm of a middle-class, male public sphere and the inclusion of women and teenagers in commercial media, is manifested in the debate on variety shows. As Hartley points out, “the democratization of the public sphere through the popular media was historically not merely accompanied by feminization and sexualization, but has been conducted through the media of feminization and sexualization, using this semiotic genre to communicate with the vast, unknowable, but sovereign and comfort-seeking readerships of modernity” (1998: 48, original emphasis). Because of the inherent contradiction of media as carrying both a “communicative” (democratic) function and a “truth-seeking” (governmental) function, the media both produce sexualization and denounce the very phenomenon they produce. These two contradictions are resolved through setting up the boundary between high/low culture, with the designation of the former category as “hard news” (informational address), associated with masculine seriousness, while the feminine triviality of “soft news” is relegated to the latter (Holland, 1998).

The division between serious news and soft news is not only laden with hierarchically structured, gendered value but is also embedded in class politics. The division between high/low culture should be located within processes of class formation (Hall, 1986; Tavener, 2000; and Bourdieu, 1984). The condemnation of popular TV such as sleazy talk shows displaces class issues, for the condemnation itself is predicated upon the norm of bourgeois civility in the public sphere (Tavener, 2000 and Birmingham, 2000). In analyzing variety shows in Taiwan, it is important to pay attention to the unequal access to transnational cultural commodities such as the HBO and Discovery channels and “local” variety shows, the asymmetrical values attached to these two types of shows, and their relationships
with class formation. In general, those who have access to HBO mostly belong to the new professional managerial class whose identities and sense of belonging transcend the confines of the nation-state, while those who are bound to the "local" or to watch "local" shows tend to be the most disadvantaged groups.

Taking these critiques into account, it becomes urgent that we retheorize variety shows, that we produce a new way of looking at variety shows without being trapped in the two opposite positions. How do we, as feminists, change the representations/treatment of women in variety shows without imposing bourgeois taste on the working class or teenagers? How do we theorize the opening up of popular media to traditionally marginalized groups such as sexual minorities/women/girls while at the same time critiquing the exploitation/objectification of women?

Producing Avenues of Escape

I want to rethink the issue of sexualization/eroticization of women and girls in popular media without being trapped in the mainstream critique of exploitation/objectification of women/girls or the "Cultural Studies" critique of celebrating this sexualization. Central to the debate is the notion of media as a public sphere. While the media reformers believe that the public sphere should be equally accessible to all identity groups, they also believe sobriety to be the appropriate style of public address. The opposing camp, on the contrary, believes that visibility of any marginalized group should be read as a form of democratization, of disrupting the status quo.

Many feminists have pointed out the gendered dimension of the public sphere (e.g. Landes, 1998; Deem, 1996; Holland, 1998). The male public sphere is constituted through the eviction of the male body:

The political sphere has been constituted through the "naturalized" historical link between masculinity, political agency, and speech. Thus the recognition of the "historical antinomy between women and public authority" has been particularly important for feminism... The abstract(ed) body of the bourgeois white male, imbued with rational speech, came to stand in for the representativeness of the political. Logics of abstraction account for the invisibility of the male body and the simultaneous visibility of those groups traditionally associated with the body, affect, and desire. (Deem, 1996: 512)

The male public sphere conducted through the rendering invisible of the male body and the constant presentation of women's/girls' bodies, particu-
larly through the use of the camera to create them as being sexually different from the normative male, constitutes no moment of democratization. Even at the most radical moment for the opposing camp, when variety shows feature "betel nut girls" or transvestites, the show host's and the camera's focus still produce these marginal groups as spectacles for the consumption of the male audience. The "sexual radicals" attempt to bring marginal sexualities to the political in their discussion on variety shows, however, reinforces the norm of masculine heterosexual desire and female desirability as they are premised upon the hypereroticization of the female body (hooks, 1994). As a result, "[b]y reinforcing sexual difference, the nature of the democratic discursive space is brought into question" (Holland, 1998: 28).

Holland argues that if sexual difference is always presented in a way that highlights sexual inequality, as in variety shows featuring women's/girls' bodies for heterosexual male pleasure, the negotiation of the line between feminization (as an attempt to broaden the male public sphere) and sexualization is closed off. "A politics of sexual fantasy which opens up a gap between women and men by reinforcing men's 'sex-right' over women's bodies continues to imply a political allegiance which ultimately undermines democratic participatory rights, and which continues to link the feminine with the trivial" (Holland 1998: 31). Hence, it is still necessary, at least in contemporary context, to keep critiquing the power inequality embedded in the popular media's re-presentations of sexualized women and girls as the media attempt to include a larger audience.

However, if the public sphere is predicated on the eviction or abstraction of the male body, the exposure of the male body in the political imaginary constitutes a moment of danger for the maintenance of the façade of a "gender-neutral" public sphere. Variety shows offer us such an opportunity for making the male body visible in the public sphere, and it is along this line of reading variety shows that a new discursive space for feminism can be opened up.

The "vulgarity" in variety shows provides an escape route. Deem specifies the liberating potential of scatology: "Scatological rhetoric is indecorous discourse which, through the lushness of bodily excess, deterritorializes language, pushing it to its extremes" (1996: 523). Decorum functions as distinction and exclusion for "the very substance of bourgeois subject [and citizenship] is constructed through sanitized modes of address" (p. 527). On the one hand, masculine speech excludes women from participation in the public sphere (as women's speech is relegated to the genre of the complaint or nagging); on the other hand, scatology
exposes male physicality as it belongs to the domain of the male. In this sense, scatology exposes the hypocrisy of rational male speech, opening up a space for women's speech in the public sphere.

Scatological language is the property of the male: locker-room talk happens away from women and the political. The female is denied access to the scatological precisely because the scatological speaks the male. The physicality of the male is betrayed through scatological performance despite his best efforts to totalize himself through the abstraction of language. This practice actually turns language back upon itself and shows that the physical, the scatological, is the habitat of the male. . . . Classifying scatology, the catalogue of male physicality, as obscene and improper, is a strategy seeking to distance the physical threat from man's fragile fantasy of abstract completion. (Deem, 1996: 530)

In this line of reading, Jacky Wu’s (variety-show-host) “vulgarity” should be conceptualized as making private locker-room talk visible in the public sphere, as exposing male physicality; hence, threatening the invisibility of the male body which underwrites bourgeois decorum. The focus on how women's or girls’ bodies are objectified produces unintended ill-effects of reinforcing the image of female passivity, of women as noncitizens and male teenagers as the subject of “nation.” Instead, if we look at how, in talking vulgarly about women’s bodies, the primary male host also reveals his own physicality; or if we focus on how female guests or other female co-hosts talk back and redirect our attention to the male body, the possibility of the male phallus shrinking to male penis is created, especially when the phallus/penis is exposed in the public for laughter.

In fact, these moments of reducing male power by exposing male physicality are not rare. Instead, they have become part of the generic traits of variety shows. Female co-host Ah-bao, when interacting with the main hosts, Hu-gua and Jacky Wu, constantly makes fun of their body sizes, their faces, and even their pretentious sexual prowess. Similarly, Tao-zi, the female host in Notes on Love (Lian ai jiang yi), often expresses her sexual desire for the male body and asks men to “take off your pants” and “wag your butt for me.” These moments create avenues of liberation, not only in the sense that they expose male physicality through male hosts’ vulgarity, but also through women’s participation in scatology, in undermining the speech mode traditionally associated with the male.

However, this reading should be accompanied by a critique of the high/low culture distinction in maintaining a class-/gender-based social
Irene Fang-chih Yang

order through the domain of culture. While variety shows have been relegated to the domain of the low, it is necessary to refocus our attention to how this “lowness” is created out of particular social and economic relations. As my previous analysis indicates, it is with the liberalization of media and the rise of the new “transnational” professional middle class that variety shows are relegated to the local/low and that BBC and Discovery channels are overvalued as the proper address of the (male) public sphere. Without such a critique which links the discursive space to material inequalities, a rereading of variety shows as exposing male physicality and as women’s participation in scatology remains ineffective, for it does not challenge the “triviality” associated with variety shows.

Notes

1 There are many factors which contributed to the change of the variety genre, including the liberalization of cable TV, the scarcity of major variety-show hosts in Taiwan as the result of an increasing need for variety shows, the economic recession, and the public’s intervention, including the critics’ attacks outlined here (Yang, 2002).

2 The first position was largely articulated by people from MediaWatch, such as Chang Jin-hua, Huang Hao-rong, and people from the left, Lin Shen-jing and Wang Li-xia. The second position was articulated mostly by Ka Wei-bou. Of course I am simplifying the debate, particularly on the issue between left politics and sexual politics (between Lin and Ka). I am also excluding Chang Jin-hua’s later article which uses Bourdieu’s notion of “field” and “habitus” to go beyond the passive/active audience dichotomy, largely because the circulation of that article is limited to a small number of readers. Also, that article was published much later, in 2002, and should be read not as part of the debate, but as a way to escape the dilemma created by the debate.

3 This list is of course not exhaustive. Some issues are excluded, such as the one on “left” politics as debated between Lin and Ka in The Left and the issue of freedom of speech raised by Ho. These issues in the list are foregrounded in the circulation of public discourses and have also put feminists in a dead end as each is caught within their own logic of intelligibility.

4 Despite the fact that the three networks were opened up for private investment, the provincial government, the KMT party, and the military (all controlled by the KMT party) owned more than half of the stock in each of the network.

5 Cheng She is an organization consisting largely of male intellectuals and scholars, with the aim of offering timely social critique for social justice.
From Variety Shows to Body-Sculpting Commercials

Members of Cheng She take turns publishing articles on different social, political, and economic issues in *China Times* once every week.

For example, the classic book on unveiling the relationship between KMT involvement in Taiwan's broadcasting business is *Deconstructing Broadcasting Media* (*Jie guang bo mei ti*), published by the Cheng She in 1993. I thank Zi Jun-jie for providing me with this information.

Media-watch groups have existed in Taiwan since the establishment of the "Association for News Supervision" (*Xin wen ping yi hui*) in the 1960s. However, as Lin points out, these organizations were all controlled or sponsored by the KMT party; they did not fulfill their role to supervise the media (C. J. Lin, 1999).

For example, in the "2001 Communication Forum" conference, Feng invoked several quotations from newspapers to address how commercialism, exemplified through their wide coverage of media violence and sex, had negative impact on society as a whole, especially the moral standards of our teenagers and children.

According to *Broadcaster*, a trade journal, 52.4% of variety-show audiences are women. In terms of age, only 23% of the normal viewers (as opposed to heavy viewers) are between 13 to 19 years old. People from age 20 to 39 constitute 52.3% of variety-show viewers, while people with no income constitute 33.6% (Y. L. Lin, 2000: 54-8). It is reasonable to infer from these numbers that housewives (women, people with low education, and low or no income), not children and teenagers, constitute the majority of variety-show audiences.

News such as this dominated our everyday reading of newspapers. I will only list a few here: "Police Caught Teenagers Possessing Rave in a Pub in Kaohsu- ing" (*China Times*, 5/12/2001); "Teenagers Were Caught Selling Bootleg CDs in MRT station" (*China Times* Evening News, 28/12/2001)); and "Preventing Teenagers from Motor-bike Racing" (*China Times*, 23/12/2001).

According to Xyu and Chen (1996), between 1961 and 1992, 62% of research done in communication studies belonged to the positivist paradigm. And more updated surveys indicate that 70% of research belongs to this category.

Good (1995) identifies some research as recognizing the audience's active status, such as Huang's *Decoding Variety Shows' Gender Discourse* (1994); however, audience's resistant reading is allowed only when polysemy exists within the texts. Hence, in this work, despite Huang's recognition of possible alternative readings of comedy skits in variety shows, the overall tone tends toward the ideological closure inscribed in the text in producing a gendered subject.

For example, Chang, Wei-chiang's article on "Audience and News Reading," published in Research on Journalism 1997.

Irene Fang-chih Yang

References


From Variety Shows to Body-Sculpting Commercials


Irene Fang-chih Yang


