From Censorship to Irony

Rhetorical Responses to 9/11

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1   Relationships between popular culture and dominant systems of power can emerge more clearly in crisis than in routine times. Powerful economic and political forces attempted to use 9/11 as a rationale to discipline popular culture. Here I examine how this happened and how it spurred a form of at least provisional cultural resistance. I look at two instances of attempted repression of popular culture that occurred post-911 and at how the success of each was limited by popular cultural reactions against it.

2   The first involved an attempt to regulate popular cultural music, because of its perceived "inappropriateness" in the wake of the attacks. The Clear Channel radio corporation decided to circulate a list of pop songs that corporate officials suggested not be played in the wake of the attacks, due to their potential to offend the "sensitivities" of radio listeners. What the Clear Channel attempted was a distinctively postmodern form of censorship – postmodern in the sense that it was imposed, not by the authority of the modern state, but by large, multi-national, corporate interests in the name of "choice." The attempted suppression was ineffective on one level because of the unruliness of popular music as a site of cultural struggle. On another level, however, it was effective in supporting a wider discourse of discipline that has been an important feature of post 9/11 politics. That certain songs might be deemed inappropriate for playing in the wake of a cataclysmic tragedy is not surprising and perhaps, under some circumstances, not even dangerous. What was troubling about Clear's response was the breadth of the impact, given the company's substantial distributional assets, its often inexplicable selection of materials, and the list's implicit support for ongoing attempts at political repression.

3   A second response to 9/11 was its framing as the "death of irony." Some suggested, indeed hoped, that 9/11 would rein in and discipline the "smirking" and superficial ironies endemic to many popular cultural productions – personified especially by the television program *Seinfeld*. "Irony" had previously been under siege by an eclectic array of liberal and conservative critics, the most prominent liberal being Jedediah Purdy. The WTC attack, some thought, revealed the nihilistic implications of ironic discourses. Yet hopes that popular cultural discourses would

become more "serious" in a world in which "everything had changed" were short-lived, as a new and darkly ironic discourse emerged with 9/11 imagery as its subject. In April, media reports surfaced of teenagers using 9/11 "slang" as a mechanism of psychological normalizing. Irony's re-emergence was politically significant, evidence of both the strength and limitations of popular cultural resistance.

4   The events of 9/11 triggered the censor's impulse: to narrow, to control, to consolidate, to protect. Popular culture's ubiquity, the result partly of its transmission through large transnational media corporations, led to the channeling of this impulse in historically specific ways. The Clear Channel's strange and unaccountable list was one. Pronouncements of "the death of irony" were another. Forces that sought to discipline the popular culture, from corporate managers to magazine columnists, had seemingly found their moment; and they would use it to their advantage. Yet their attempted repressions were not entirely successful, nor could they be. While accurately gauging the extent of their success is difficult, the reappearance of irony demonstrated that the disruptive impulses that are crucial to popular culture's appeal, while perhaps wounded, were not entirely dead. Ironic interventions into the meanings of 9/11 reasserted vitality in the face of death and resistance in the face of control. Censorship made irony's *re*emergence possible, and perhaps inevitable.

5   The events of 9/11 thus revealed underlying tensions between popular culture and various cultural authorities that are and have been uncomfortable with its unruliness, seeing it as a sign of cultural degeneration. The vitality of the popular culture was re-affirmed by post 9/11 events, as producers and consumers reaffirmed its significance for sense making even – perhaps especially in – a politically troubled and dangerous world. Thus there are grounds for hope that progressive moments may yet emerge, but one needs to be careful: the capacities of popular cultures to generate resistance are constrained, if not entirely controlled, by systems of power that were reinforced by the terrorist attack.

The List

6   A little more than a week after the attack on the World Trade Center, reports began to circulate that the Clear Channel had "barred,"[1] "banned,"[2] or "yanked,"[3] 150 songs from its nationwide playlists. The decision, if true, was significant, because of the size of market-share controlled by the Clear Channel. The roster drew a good deal of attention. Partly this was because, as *The Houston Chronicle*, noted "some free speech activists cried foul."[4] But it was due in part to the specific songs on it. Songs seem to have been listed because they

"contain[ed] lyrics with words such as: fire, plane, bullets, knives, bombs, destroy, suicide, and dust."[5] The executives at Clear worked with a broad brush.

7   The 150 titles on the proscribed list can be organized into four categories. First are those with titles that might have violent images or overtones, possibly making them inappropriate at an extraordinary moment in history. In most cases, however, such an interpretation would be warranted only by an exceptionally literalistic take on the title alone. As Los Angeles music critic Robert Hilburn put it, while the songs' titles might seem violent, "the songs themselves aren't." A good example is Peter and Gordon's "I Go to Pieces."[6] If construed literally, it might refer to someone being physically destroyed. Taken as a whole, however, it is a song about losing one's lover.[7] Others include AC/DC's "Shot Down in Flames and Safe in New York City," a song about being "shot down" when trying to pick up someone in a bar; the Gap Band's "You Dropped a Bomb on Me," about a young man being dropped by his girlfriend; and Bruce Springsteen's "I'm on Fire," about sexual desire. Like many of its songs, "Burning Down a House" by the Talking Heads is elusive in meaning but certainly not violent. "Great Balls of Fire" by Jerry Lee Lewis is about infatuation. Of the songs evidently chosen because of the "violence" of their lyrics, only "Bodies" by the thrash-metal band Drowning Pools has lyrics that refer literally to death.

8   One interpretation of the decision to list such songs is that executives at Clear Channel were relatively sophisticated semioticians, aware that the power of texts can reside in their ambiguity, their connotative potentialities, their possible provocations. Thus program directors needed to be extraordinarily careful not to unleash potentially damaging cultural material into the public space during a period of crisis. While such an interpretation is possible, it seems unlikely, partly because no one attempted to defend the list along these lines. Clear Channel executives more likely engaged in quick, simplistic, and highly literalistic reading of popular-cultural materials, reading entirely inconsistent with the ambiguities that make such materials popular. Those who manage Clear Channel stations showed little if any understanding of the music over which they have a good deal of distributional control.

9   A second category targets more overtly political songs. This category makes more sense semiotically, given that its songs make political statements that could be interpreted as leftist or pacifist, and thus could be construed as potentially subversive. Here the progammers at the Clear Channel did seem to grasp, to some extent, the songs' meanings. That makes the decision to ban such songs *more* troubling, because it shows a conscious desire to suppress what was construed as political

dissent in the wake of the attacks. Included are Barry McGuire's classic '60s folk tune "Eve of Destruction" (banned for the second time in thirty-six years) and "every song ever recorded" by Rage Against the Machine. Rage, a leftist band now disbanded, had a long and storied history of theatrical politics. It even burned an American flag on *Saturday Night Live*. Since Clear's stated aim was to protect the "sensitivities" of its listeners, this second category of songs implies that any kind of political criticism, even when it has no connection to the attack, would be construed, at least temporarily, as "insensitive."

10   A third category of songs includes those that might have tortured topical ties to 9/11 but lack connection violence or politics. The would-be ban included "Walk like an Egyptian" by the Bangles (because the hijackers were Middle Eastern?), "He Ain't Heavy, He's My Brother" by the Hollies (because someone's brother may have died in the attack?), "What a Wonderful World" by Louis Armstrong (because it isn't any longer?), "Ninety-Nine Red Balloons" by Nena (because Al Qaeda is our enemy in somewhat the same way that the "Reds" had been?), "Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da" by the Beatles (because life doesn't "go on"?), "America" by Neil Diamond (because the "they" of "they're coming to America" could be hijackers?). Your guess is as good as mine. It is difficult to know what to say of the inclusion of such songs. They make us wonder whether the notion of respecting popular "sensitivity," put forward as a justification for the company's actions, had any semiotic boundaries at all.

11   In the fourth category are songs that seem exceptionally appropriate to the circumstances but not the least objectionable. These are songs of solace and reflection. The attacks may have offered an occasion for a song as overplayed and sweetly sentimental as Paul Simon's "Bridge Over Troubled Water" to sound fresh again. John Lennon's brilliant "Imagine," also listed by Clear Channel, eventually became seen as a prescient, yet ambiguous, comment on the attack. This came after Neil Young performed a haunting version on a nationally televised benefit for the families of those who had died. Lennon's lyrics had managed to capture and question the motives of the Al Qaeda terrorists but also those domestic politicians who would use the attack to stoke nationalist fervor and protect their own political power.

12   Cat Stevens might be given a category all his own. Two of his songs, "Peace Train" and "Morning Has Broken," were listed – apparently because he is now a practicing Muslim.[8]

13   These categories are simply a provisional attempt to make sense of what Clear Channel programmers might have been trying to do. Their list came with no rationale, attempt to distinguish various materials, or

defense for including some songs over others. As a result, it is likely to strike readers as irrational. The apparent irrationality does not seem to have been intentional, a subterfuge designed to make it more difficult for readers and listeners to discern the intentions of executives at the Clear Channel. Had there been an overt attempt to suppress only "political" songs, that would have been deplorable, but at least it might have made political sense.   The program directors at Clear might as well have taped all their playlists to the wall and thrown 150 darts to determine songs for the list. As the President of Standard Broadcasting in Toronto understated, "It's a pretty weird list."[9]

14   As soon as the list became public, Clear Channel began to backpedal. Pam Taylor, a spokeswoman for the media conglomerate, stated that there was never a "directive" from the station's corporate headquarters to pull or ban any songs. Rather, she said, "This was an effort to help people to be sensitive to an unthinkable environment. It's been somewhat turned into some sort of evil attempt to control pop music, and that's absurd."[10] Another spokeswoman, Rebecca Almon, said that "This is not a mandate, nor was the list generated out of the corporate radio offices. When we found out about the substance of this list, we let folks know that we don't support it."[11] Executives at Clear Channel claimed that, in fact, the list had been generated spontaneously by local program directors, who were circulating it among themselves. They were said to be making individual judgments about what might be appropriate, taking into account complaints that they might have received from listeners. It was essentially a "grassroots" effort.

15   *The New York Times*, however, reported that anonymous sources at Clear had a somewhat more "complicated" story to tell. According to them, a "smaller list of questionable songs was originally generated by the corporate office, but an overzealous regional executive began contributing suggestions and circulating the list via e-mail, where it continued to grow."[12] That regional program director apparently was Jack Evans, Clear's senior regional vice president of programming in California. According to Taylor, he "jotted down a few dozen titles that could be considered insensitive,"[13] producing a list "he thought might have some songs on it that might cause heightened sensitivity given the tragic events last week."[14] (*Slate* reporter Eliza Truitt accused Clear of attempting to deny the existence of the list, although it seems that Clear did not deny the existence of a list so much as deny that it itemized "banned" songs.[15])

16   Individual programmers sometimes ignored the list and sometimes added to it. In Florida, local program director and DJ Mason Dixon pulled all songs from the 1960s and '70s that deal with anti-war

sentiment: for example, the Temptation's "War." As Dixon put it, "Under the circumstances here, it's not really appropriate talking about 'war, what is it good for.' It's making a statement that I don't think reflects America's taste right now."[16] The circulation of the list, it could be argued, confirmed to programmers around the nation that it was legitimate and perhaps that they were expected to trim from their own playlists songs that might be construed as "inappropriate."

17 Editorial reaction to the Clear Channel effort was unfavorable. While a *Los Angeles Times* editorial took a swipe at the record industry for marketing songs with "violent and misogynistic" lyrics, it also ridiculed the choice of songs on the list. "The goal, as always," said the editorial, "is not to censor individual songs but to think about songs as they are written and recorded."[17] Music critic George Varga labeled the move "pathetic."[18] In the *Baltimore Sun*'s Arts section, Chris Kaltenbach wrote that "the list is a scattershot approach to political correctness and patriotism that alternatively is thoughtful and silly, earnest, and laughable. It's also, in a very real sense, dangerous."[19] Ed Masley, *Pittsburgh Post* pop critic, labeled the list as the "worst sort of knee-jerk hysteria."[20] In *The London Times*, Giles Coren called the list "astonishing" and concluded that "Freedom of expression is always one of the early casualties of war. And censorship should never be taken lightly. Clear Channel would do well to remember that the Taliban prohibited music and singing altogether."[21]

18 A defense of Clear's actions could be found on the Snopes "Urban Legends Reference Pages," an online site that offers – as the name implies – to dispel various "urban legends" on matters ranging from American history to the Disney Corporation. According to Snopes, "It's not unusual in a time of sadness and mourning such as the one following the September 11 terrorist attacks on the U.S. that radio and television stations temporarily suspend the airing of material – programs, songs, advertisements – that might be considered insensitive or in bad taste. . . . So many radio stations have recently invoked voluntary moratoriums on songs which refer to airplanes, crashes, violence, and death in their lyrics and titles."[22] Snopes contended that, "Other than some rather questionable choices of songs, the only thing remarkable about this list is that so many sensation-hungry news outlets have attempted to spin it as an outrageous mandate by Clear Channel to 'ban' certain songs from the airwaves."[23] While Snopes admitted that listing "Ticket to Ride" and "Ruby Tuesday" might "be a bit extreme," it claimed that "there's no telling what an audience might find upsetting in the current climate."[24] The last statement is probably true, which is precisely the problem.

19 In the end, it seems that Clear did not impose a ban on certain songs, it

only "suggested" one; and the suggestions may or may not have been generated at the front desk of the corporate office, although the list seems to have had the support of the company's executives. The somewhat ambiguous character of Clear's actions make an attack against "censorship" more difficult. It is precisely why they deserve close scrutiny. In past conflicts, such as World War I or the Cold War, the primary locus of expression's suppression was by public authorities. In the current context, information flows are organized, but never entirely controlled, by huge transnational corporations. Now the suppression of ideas, images, and cultures can more easily and, in some sense, accurately, be cast as a matter of private "choice." Radio-station owners and operators make these "choices" without a governmental mandate, so that legal questions of "censorship" are largely avoided. The time of trouble might have been relatively brief, since the list was disowned relatively quickly. Yet there is no way to ascertain whether playlists have returned now to normal or whether they ever will. Moreover it is exactly when hysteria is at its highest and public opinion at its most uniform that alternative voices are most needed: because at such points of crisis, our political futures are determined.

20   The Clear Channel list is politically important for three reasons. First, Clear Channel actions reveal how centralized judgments about what is "appropriate" popular expression during crisis, war, and more ordinary times are being made by private authorities. These wield tremendous economic power, with considerable influence over the creation and dissemination of cultural capital. Second, the station's rationale points to a shift toward the therapeutic as justification for the control of popular expression. Third, the list is part of a larger political context in which judgments are being made daily, by both private and public authorities, about appropriate expression in our post-9/11 world.

Consolidation

21   Exploration of the first issue, the problem of centralized control, must take into account shifts in the economic context of radio. In particular, it needs to consider monopolization of the airwaves and the important role of the Clear Channel in that process.

22   Following the passage of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, what James W. Brock has labeled an "epic wave" of consolidation occurred. Mergers in the radio business jumped by 40% as 2000 stations and $14.3 billion changed hands.[25] In the years that followed, 11,000 radio stations had changes in ownership. Brock notes that "mergers and acquisitions have radically transformed a field dominated by a handful of giant operating national chains of hundreds – in some cases thousands – of

stations."[26] The number of stations grew by four percent, from 10,403 to 10,795; but the number of owners fell from 4,865 to 3,832, a 20% decline.[27] Within this manic period of business activity, the Clear Channel resulted from mergers of several large radio chains.

23 Based in San Antonio in 1996, L. Lowry Mays owned 36 radio stations with about $74 million in total revenues. Mays had begun by selling stocks. He reluctantly purchased his first radio station in 1972 from a San Antonio furniture dealer who wanted to sell this unprofitable business. Two years later, Mays purchased a second, and he slowly added more. He took the company public in 1984.[28] Clear Channel now has $8 billion in annual revenue, with 1,214 local radio stations under its corporate umbrella. These operate in 190 cities nationwide. Clear Channel and Westinghouse, a larger media giant, together account for 52% of all radio listeners in the top-ten metro markets.[29] Taken together, the top ten radio conglomerates control 2,000 radio stations across the country.

24 Clear's corporate activities are not limited to radio. The company owns the largest American live-concert promotion company, 19 television stations, and 770,000 billboards.[30] Clear also has entered into small-venue concert promotions, purchasing the booking rights for some 1,000-seat nightclubs.[31]

25 The consolidation of ownership has driven consolidation of delivery systems. A smaller number of sources deliver goods to local marketplaces, while at the same time generating the illusion that they are local stations. Thanks to digital advances, DJs can now broadcast "local" programming from a few centralized locations. Since music is now heavily formatted, the DJ's sole responsibility is to provide a voice for the four or five breaks that occur each broadcasting hour, for some two minutes in total. DJs "customize" an hour or two of chatter, and load it into a computer program. It automatically interjects their material at appropriate places. DJs glean tidbits of "local knowledge" for their comments from faxes and e-mails sent by staff members who work "on the ground" in far-flung communities. Audiences might believe that DJs are broadcasting from across town, when in fact they might be located several states away.

26 As a technical matter, up to 80% of Clear Channel stations could be included in this form of digital network.[32] As with consolidation of other forms of global capital, one of the primary efficiencies involves labor costs. By centralizing delivery, Clear was able to reduce the number of DJs working for the station. (Those left tend to be highly skilled, because they need to balance the demands of organizing the chatter of several

radio stations at once. Keeping six or seven radio stations in play at one time can be challenging.[33]) Recently Clear Channel again set precedents by sharing local-news anchors along with DJs. Even listener contests, a long-time staple of local radio programs, are being consolidated. Listeners at a station may be offered a chance to win a $1000 prize for being, say, the tenth caller – unaware that they are competing against listeners in 33 other cities. As with interstate lotteries, prizes have skied in value to include vacations and cars. Yet the chances of winning have shrunk, since (unlike lotteries) the contests usually have only one winner per prize. The locations of winning contestants are often not made public, although Clear claims that announcements are broadcast, as a matter of policy, "four times a day."[34] Still, in 2000, Clear Channel was fined $80,000 by the Florida Attorney General's office for disguising a national contest as local by "interviewing" the winner with the spliced-over voice of a local DJ.[35]

27 Increased size and control of market share can lead to arrogance and abuse of power. A number of accusations by generally credible sources claim that Clear Channel has engaged in anti-competitive practices. In January, southern California Congressman Howard Berman suggested that the Justice Department investigate Clear Channel for violating the Telecommunications Act by using corporate fronts to exceed allowable-ownership limits. One strategy is to take control of the programming and advertising of small independent stations, while keeping ownership nominally independent. Clear has such agreements with 75 stations across the country.[36] Clear Channel also has been accused of demanding payments in exchange for air time.[37] It did not play Britney Spears, accusers say, because she did not hire the company to organize one of her tours.[38]

28 Dorothy Pomerantz, writing in *Forbes Magazine*, has suggested that the consolidation of the radio business creates more variety on the airwaves. The argument is that small independent stations become "homogenized," because they are all attempting to capture a largest slice of local advertising dollars, whereas a large firm that owns several stations in a given area tends to diversify to avoid competing with itself. As evidence, Pomerantz cites Syracuse, New York, where Clear offers 10 formats on 12 stations. Defenders of consolidation also argue that there are so many venues available for listening that, even if radio becomes overly "homogenized," it will not destroy "diversity."[39] Internet stations, CDs, and other options protect individual choice.

29 Format differentiation is not, however, a good indicator of playlist diversity. Various formats overlap; and within formats, the artists that get airplay are generally those with major-label support and distribution.

That virtually every band or artist on the Clear Channel list is solidly in the musical mainstream indicates the kind of "diversity" promoted by corporate giants, both within and between various formats. (Somehow "Bill Gates Must Die" by John Vanderslice did not make it onto the Clear Channel list.)

30 It is also becoming harder to locate distribution outlets beyond mainstream media. MP3 sources Napster and Audio Galaxy have been shut down. While Kazaa,. Morpheus, and other file trading programs remain, the recording industry seems more determined than ever to bring file-sharers under control.[40] Low-wattage radio stations are illegal, and their managers are vigorously prosecuted. Internet radio stations are now subject to royalty fees that will put many small operators out of business.[41] Musical diversity that has flourished at the margins is, in other words, being slowly but systematically eliminated from the cultural marketplace.

31 Sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously, artists shape their musical sounds to make them radio friendly. "As a record producer," says T. Bone Burnett (of the Grammy-winning soundtrack for *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*), "I see [centralized control and market testing] all the time, because people come in and say, 'This record, we're going to try something different. We're going to push the boundaries. We're going to get out of the box.' And as they go through the process they start out very brave, trying things. And by the end of the record, it sounds just like every other record because at that point all the conventional wisdom has come in. You know, 'Well, the radio won't play that. We won't be able to, you know . . .'"[42]

32 Regional radio stations – even regional musics – are mostly in decline. The local traditions and practices of Nashville, Tupelo, or the south-side of Chicago have been eliminated from most commercial radio programming. Local musical traditions are continually under siege from the homogenizing influences of radio, as young people who seek musical success follow the formulas rather than dig into the traditions of the places where they live. Such places provided the energy and originality for what became American popular music. Artistic success now often hinges on "crossover potential," which encourages attempts to fudge what may at one time have been relatively distinct categories. Twenty years ago, Shania Twain would have been unrecognizable as a "country" artist. Today she is difficult to distinguish in musical style from "rock/rap" artist Kid Rock. Clear's tendency, when it moves into a new market, is to shift toward "soft rock" – the least offensive, most "mainstream" of rock formats. Playing the songs of Billy Joel and Bruce Springsteen also serve the interests of concert promotion, since such acts

draw particularly well.[43]

33　Partly as a result of homogenizing trends, listeners are losing interest. Radio listening has declined noticeably. From 1998 to 2002, the average fell from 21 to 19 hours a week. Cat Collins, program director at KQKS, puts in concisely: "Radio sucks. It's not what it used to be anymore."[44] Listener decline has eroded the profits of corporate giants like Clear. In the fourth quarter of 2001, company sales fell 8%; and net company earnings for the entire year fell 45%. These figures shocked investors, and the stock dropped 10% after the news became public.[45] President Mark Mays's response was to suggest that the company would continue to expand, by acquiring more radio stations, and might acquire television stations as well.[46] In May 2002, Clear Channel reported a first-quarter loss of $16.9 billion as the cost of complying with an accounting change that required the valuation of acquired assets. But the loss was less than expected, so the value of the company's stock increased from $45.12 to $46.66 a share: good news, considering that the company's stock had fallen 15% the previous year.

34　Given the size of the company and an owner whose main interests seem to have been financial rather than cultural, it is perhaps unsurprising that executives and program directors would take a ham-handed approach to programming after the September attacks. We might expect the owners and managers of such large institutions to have little sense of the meaning or value of the cultural material that they distribute, except in the most narrow and market-oriented terms. The Clear Channel list sustained no coherent connection between the meanings of the songs and the rationale for their suppression. The ludicrous character of the effort indicates the cultural and semiotic ineptitude of those who control a large sector of popular-cultural capital. The Clear Channel list is worrisome because it involved a kind of censorship but also because it revealed how the economic forces that exert huge influence over productions of popular culture have little sense of their richness of meaning.

"Sensitivities"

35　The Clear Channel criterion of "sensitivity" is problematic. Clear's list did not censor in a traditional way. It was not designed primarily to prevent subversive ideas from entering public spaces, where they might spark disorder, but to protect listener "sensitivities." Mike O'Connor, Clear's FM programming director for Colorado, was reported to say that the "company was erring on the side of sensitivity."[47] Or as pop critic Neil Strauss put it, "Instead of promoting national safety, its intended aim is to ensure the national mental health."[48] Historically the idea of suppressing expression to protect "sensitivities" of impressionable people

has been disputed in the United States. The American rationale for allowing expression to be suppressed identified levels of danger. The "clear and present danger" test, at first interpreted generously by Oliver Wendell Holmes to include handing out leaflets in front of a naval shipyard, at least implies that speech suppression needs a political rationale.[49] When the Supreme Court moved in the 1960s toward the somewhat more demanding test of whether speech would "incite to imminent lawless action,"[50] the focus remained the potential of speech for fostering subversion or generating public disorder. While the judgments on how much to protect speech rights may have varied, the emphasis in these cases is protecting the social order from perceived threats to its stability. Whether people's "sensitivities" might be offended does not factor overtly into the legal calculus.

36 Matters of "sensitivity" entered into free-speech debates through "offensive speech." The conflict between a local radio station and the FCC over broadcasting George Carlin's "seven words" comes closer to issues raised by the Clear Channel list. The Supreme Court ruled that the FCC was justified in its rules and that "offensive" broadcast material could be grounds for restricting broadcasts in certain timeslots, when young listeners are most likely to tune in. But in *FCC v. Pacifica Foundation*, the Supreme Court primarily addressed matters of "indecency." The Clear Channel notion of sensitivity is more amorphous. In fact, the Clear Channel list seemed to collapse political and emotional concerns in ways with scant precedent. If a test of whether popular-cultural material may be withheld from public spaces hinges on the capacity to offend sensibilities, little could escape institutional control. Many more opportunities for such regulation could become available if the "war on terrorism" continues indefinitely.

37 Attempts to manage popular music became part of a broader attempt to manage dissent. Others were perhaps more insidious. On *Politically Incorrect* for September 17, Bill Maher said that, unlike the WTC attackers, "we have been cowards, lobbing cruise missiles from 2,000 miles away." In response, Presidential Press Secretary Ari Fleischer warned, "The reminder is to all Americans that they need to watch what they say, watch what they do, and that this is not a time for remarks like this. It never was."[51] The show was immediately, albeit temporarily, removed from the programming schedule. Despite Maher's profuse apologies, his contract was terminated in June of the following year.

38 University of Texas journalism professor Robert Jensen, in a column in the *Houston Chronicle*, labeled the 9/11 attack "reprehensible and indefensible," but went on to suggest that the "act was no more despicable than the massive acts of terrorism – the deliberate killing of

civilians for political purposes – that the government has committed during my lifetime." For this, he was rebuked by University President Larry Faulkner, who wrote a letter to the newspaper stating that "Jensen is not only misguided, but has become a fountain of undiluted foolishness on issues of public policy."[52]

39 Limiting or shutting down public discourse has been an important feature of post-9/11 political life. The rationale is to protect us from future disruptions. One reason we are "vulnerable," repeat pundits and politicians, is that we are an "open society." If "openness" is vulnerability, controlling unruly aspects of the culture can seem reasonable to help insure our safety. This has been true in past conflicts as well. What is different now is the pervasiveness of popular cultures regarded as unruly and often "inappropriate" by the sources responsible for their distribution. These sources are private and thus not subject to the same kinds of legal challenges as public censorship. This is a troubling development, especially when their concentration and centralization might rival those of public authorities in oppressive regimes.

The Irony Debate in the Context of 9/11

40 Irony has a long and varied history that can, in the West, be traced at least to classical Greece.[53] In the narrowest and simplest terms, irony is a literary device where the literal and intended meaning of a statement diverge. As Wayne Booth puts it, "every reader learns that some statements cannot be understood without rejecting what they seem to say."[54] In literature, Booth suggests, "stable irony" provides a "literary fixity," in which a reader "knows" with a high degree of certainty that the writer does not intend the words written to be taken "straight." Errors in interpretation can occur, of course, and a reader can be tricked by irony – perhaps later to recognize it with some degree of embarrassment. Still it would be difficult, to take one of Booth's examples, to read Jonathan Swift's *Modest Proposal,* as anything other than ironic.[55]

41 Irony is not limited to fairly narrow, albeit interesting and important, matters of literary interpretation. The presence and significance of irony in a culture has often been a subject for investigation and commentary. Since irony can reveal social absurdities and hypocrisies, as in Swift's hands, it can be a wicked tool for social critique. As such, it is sometimes resisted by cultural conservatives. Irony is correctly perceived as a potential enemy of virtue, because it questions virtue's seriousness. Kierkegaard understood this and famously attacked irony which "looks down, as it were, on plain and ordinary discourse immediately understood by everyone; it travels in an exclusive incognito. . . . it occurs

chiefly in the higher circles as a prerogative belonging to the same category as the *bon ton* requiring one to smile at innocence and regard virtue as a kind of prudishness."[56]

42   The relevance of irony to recent political debates quickened with the publication of Jedediah Purdy's *For Common Things: Irony, Trust, and Commitment in America Today*.[57] Purdy's book has received considerable attention in the few years following its publication. The stated subject is irony in general, but the target is a kind of irony extant in popular culture. Purdy follows a long line of popular cultural critics, from Matthew Arnold (whose poetry Purdy quotes) to Theodore Adorno. According to Purdy, they have seen in popular cultural representations nothing more than glitzy superficiality, entirely lacking in real cultural or political substance. "Surfaces," as Purdy distills their suggestions, may be "all we have to work with."[58]

43   A key indicator of cultural decline for Purdy has been the television program *Seinfeld*. Purdy seems genuinely horrified that the announcement of the show's retirement made the front page of *The New York Times*. He describes its end as "curiously insignificant, not because *Seinfeld* didn't matter, but because the program so perfectly echoed the tone of the culture that its new half-hour each week had triumphed by achieving redundancy. Like William Butler Yeats in W. H. Auden's elegy, Seinfeld became his admirers. There is some of him in all of us."[59] *Seinfeld* is for Purdy "irony incarnate." It epitomizes the emptiness of the surfaces offered by the popular culture. "The point of irony," Purdy suggests, "is a quiet refusal to believe in the depth of relationships, the sincerity of motivation, or the truth of speech – especially earnest speech. In place of the romantic idea that each of us harbors a true self struggling for expression, the ironist offers the suspicion that we are just quantum selves – all spin, all the way down."[60]

44   *Seinfeld* is a primary target of Purdy's ire, but he doesn't stop there. He also attacks *Wayne's World*, where "programmers and screenwriters have turned their own archives into a satiric resource." He disapproves of *Beavis and Butthead*, whose "eponymous antiheroes spend their time watching MTV – and subtly mocking its melodramatic, oversexed videos." Purdy worries about the pervasiveness of popular culture and its corrosiveness, which he views as linked. "Like the characters in *Wayne's World*, we find ourselves using phrases that are caught up in webs we did not weave, from their history on *The Brady Bunch* to President Clinton's recent use of them, to their role in the latest book of pop spirituality. In our most important moments, we inhabit a cultural echo-chamber."[61] Everything becomes a cliché. "[T]oday's youthful conversation is little more than an amalgam of pop-culture references, snatches of old song

lyrics, and bursts of laughter at what would otherwise seem the most solemn moments."[62] Predictably Purdy was disheartened by Madonna and *South Park*, but he does admire Oscar Wilde's satires, because he was a "romantic who believed that he displayed his true identity by flouting convention." Since Wilde had a "true identity," he did not deteriorated into what Purdy most abhors: the "quantum self." Wilde's "dissent" from conventions was "authentic," Purdy suggests, whereas, today dissent is "on sale at specialty boutiques."[63] With the embrace of irony, we have created a culture "worthy of despair," where "disappointment and a quiet, pervasive sadness have crept into our lives."[64]

45 To escape the despair, suggests Purdy, we search for antidotes to irony, an "anti-Seinfeld" position. Purdy finds this in ubiquitous references in the popular culture to angels. Angels are a way of "defying the weariness of the ironic culture."[65] Cars that bear bumpers stickers stating "Magic Happens" and "Mean People Suck" help "form the anti-Seinfeld position."[66] They indicate that, while we are fragmented "quanta," we are searching for a way out of the "ironist's jaded independence." "We are," Purdy says, "fragmentary, even masters of fragmentation, and we hunger for wholeness."[67]

46 The Purdy book warranted a positive story on NPR and a full story in *The New York Times Magazine*, but reviews were not uniformly positive. In *Harper's*, Roger Hodge questioned why might "the second-and third-hand musings of a 24-year-old command our attention."[68] Caleb Crain, writing for *Salon.com*, referred to Purdy as "24, photogenic, sonorous, and out of his depth."[69] Crain suggested that "Purdy, unfortunately, has not dislodged irony with faith. He has dislodged it with sly disingenuous manipulative pseudo-sincerity."[70] When a young writer faces that kind of hostility, he has hit a nerve.

47 Purdy's essay no doubt helped create a literary context for the attacks on irony that followed 9/11. Two essays contended approvingly that 9/11 meant the "death of irony." The first was published in *Vanity Fair* by its editor Graydon Carter, who (ironically) had been an editor for the satirical *Spy Magazine*. To make categorical statements in the midst of a horrific crisis seems a great temptation, presumably because responses are intense. Such statements are revealing, since it is often difficult to shield honesty in periods of trauma. At the same time, such declarations probably are mistakes, for the simple reason that judgment can be clouded by an overwhelming sense of the realities of that particular moment. Carter pronounced that "There's going to be a seismic change. I think it's the end of the age of irony. Things that are considered fringe and frivolous are going to disappear." At the time, the lack of any

important qualification made the statement seem powerful, perhaps profound.

48   Carter was then joined by *Time* columnist Roger Rosenblatt, apparently another person not inclined to be cautious in pronouncement. He wrote that "One good thing could come from this horror: it could spell the end of the age of irony." Rosenblatt could hardly contain his glee. "For some 30 years – roughly as long as the Twin Towers were upright – the folks in charge of America's intellectual life have insisted that nothing should be believed in or taken seriously. Nothing was real. With a giggle and a smirk, the chattering classes – our columnists and pop culture makers – declared that detachment and personal whimsy were the necessary tools for an oh-so-cool life." Rosenblatt suggested that the age of irony had ended because the Trade Center bombings were "real." They could not be denied. They were an antidote to our "age of irony," in which "even the most serious things were not to be taken seriously." Somewhat inexplicably, he then attacked movies where the characters "see dead people" – presumably *The Sixth Sense*,[71] a wonderful and haunting film directed by M. Night Shyamalan. He also assailed "TV hosts who talk to the 'other side' suggesting that death was not to be seen as real."[72] It is difficult to know what to make of Rosenblatt's examples. They seem to criticize a position where the possibility of a hereafter signals an incapacity to distinguish between the "realities" of life and death. That might be true in some respects, but it calls into question the "seriousness" of many of the world's religious traditions.

49   Others jumped on the anti-irony bandwagon. Taylor Branch, biographer of Martin Luther King Jr., suggested that the terrorism of 9/11 would be a "turning point against a generation of cynicism for all of us." Since the attacks on irony are often implicitly or explicitly aimed at "Gen Xers," it was interesting, but perhaps unsurprising, that Camille Dodero cast the end of irony in generational terms. Perhaps, she wrote for *The Boston Phoenix*, an alternative newspaper, "we've just witnessed the end of unbridled irony. Maybe a coddled generation that bathed itself in sarcasm will get serious."

50   Announcements of the death of irony, were not dispassionate statements of fact. Never were they coupled with expressions of regret. They revealed a censor's desire to castigate. They attempted a rhetorical discipline for ironic discourses. They expressed the wish to control them, if not eliminate them, and to minimize their potential to disrupt more settled and stable ways of knowing and being. Before 9/11, some elements of the intelligentsia viewed irony as a threat, and the events of 9/11 offered opportunities to announce its exorcism from the body politic. The argument is not that these people knew or approved of the

Clear Channel list; it is that they acted from the same apprehensions of popular culture's powerful allure, often springing from its capacities to instigate irony and play. *Finally*, they felt, these disorderly impulses could be, would be, restrained.

51   Those who excoriate irony seem to reject it for being antithetical to a virtuous national community that would presumably be restored in response to the attacks of 9/11. The anti-ironists are hostile to irony also because it implies elitism and exclusivity. Irony is damaging, so it seems, because it sets some apart in feeling superior to those others of (us?) dupes, who really believe in something and who engage in the hard daily work of building livable communities. Richard Rorty recognizes this dynamic of irony as the danger of humiliation. To read people ironically who intend to be taken seriously is to undermine them, to subvert their sense of self-respect. As he puts it, "Ironism, as I have defined it, results from awareness of the power of redescription. But most people do not want to be redescribed. They want to be taken on their own terms – taken seriously just as they are, just as they talk. The ironist tells them that the language they speak is up for grabs by her and her kind. There is something potentially very cruel about that claim. For the best way to cause people long-lasting pain is to humiliate them by making the things that seemed most important to them look futile, obsolete, and powerless."[73] Rorty considers himself a "liberal ironist." He is among those who are, "because of their realization that anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed . . . never quite able to take themselves seriously." They are "always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change, always aware of the contingency and frailty of their final vocabularies, and thus of their selves."[74] If the danger of irony lies in its capacity to humiliate, the advantage of irony lies in its capacity to engender and express modesty.

52   While irony can exclude, the other side is its capacity to create zones of inclusion or community. As Booth notes, "Often the predominant emotion when reading stable ironies is that of joining, of finding and communing with kindred spirits." These are the communities of those who "get it." Not "getting the joke" can be an unpleasant experience, but the pleasures of conspiracy generated by irony are not anchored in or dependent on the humiliation of people on the outside. In fact, everyone is in principle a potential member of the community of people who know. An author or speaker, Booth observes, "assumes *my* capacity for dealing with it, and – most important – because he grants me a kind of wisdom; he assumes that he does not have to spell out the shared and secret truths on which my reconstruction is to be built."[75] This sharing of secrets, publicly stated, is one of the chief enjoyments of irony. Thus Rorty is wrong to assert that "Irony seems an inherently private matter."

He overemphasizes irony's potentially negative consequences. "Irony," he asserts, "is, if not intrinsically resentful, at least reactive. Ironists have to have something to have doubts about, something from which to be alienated."[76] Again this might be true in some respects, yet doubt and alienation are not conditions confined to ironists: they are endemic to current life. The gift of irony is to allow playful encounters with our doubts, and to encourage others to join us in them.

53 Sweeping claims to cultural shifts, so that "nothing would be the same," turned out to be overstated. Writing in *Salon.com*, David Beers took on the anti-ironists, suggesting that, "Just when we need an ironic sensibility to remain clear-eyed in dangerous times, we're told irony is obsolete. And this from some people who've made it their business to peddle a cheapened grade of irony over the past couple of decades until we've almost forgotten the true meaning of the word."[77] The anti-ironists, Beers explained, had misunderstood the true meaning of irony. It had been reduced to "the nihilistic shrug of an irritatingly shallow smartass. . . . Somehow, irony has come to be a handy shorthand for moral relativism and self-absorption, for consuming all that is puerile while considering oneself too hip to be implicated in the supply and demand economics of schlock."[78] Against this interpretation of irony, Beers proposed the "ironic engagement" of early twentieth-century essayist Randolph Bourne, who suggested that "The ironist is ironical, not because he does not care, but because he cares too much."

54 While the supposed death of irony became an opportunity for sermonizing about the decline of moral culture in the mainstream press, a more interesting take on irony's dangers was developed by *San Francisco Chronicle* arts critic Kevin Weston in examining the relationship between the "war on terrorism" and hip-hop culture. Weston was disturbed that the culture of gangsta rap had prepared a generation of young black men to support a national call to arms. Irony was being used, he argued, to reinforce the support. A Bay-area radio station that specialized in rap and R&B carried Osama jokes and insults three or four times an hour: "'Osama's mama is so short, you can see her feet in her driver's license picture." "Osama's mama is so fat, if she cut herself, she would bleed fudge." According to Weston, this Clear Channel station carried none of the songs of the 1960s which were associated with civil rights struggles or the anti-war movement, such as Marvin Gaye's "What's Going On." Rap artists, such as Dr. Dre and P. Diddy, were producing Osama disses that supported the war effort. Tupac Shakur's songs about urban gang violence were being used "to steel his young fans on the idea of being a soldier for America."[79] Weston didn't declare irony dead; rather he found it alive and well, operating as an instrument of social control, a means to demonize an already feared and hated enemy.

And why not? Wasn't Al Qaeda violence similar to the gang activity that had touch many young black men in various ways?

Irony's Resurrection

55   Somehow irony did not "die" with the destruction of the WTC towers. Not long after the attack, various indications appeared that irony would return in a variety of guises. *The Onion* put out an issue within a month, and it was heralded as missing none of the bite in previous issues. In one story, the editors presented an interview with "God," who said that the divine proscriptions against murder were *clearly* and *simply* stated. Another story suggested that the hijackers "were surprised to find themselves in hell," noting that they had "expected eternal paradise for this." One headline read, "U.S. Vows to Defeat Whoever We're at War with." Even Jedediah Purdy was quoted in *The New York Times* to say that some forms of irony can "work to keep dangerous excesses and self-righteousness and extreme conviction at bay." Even Graydon Carter eventually revised his claim, stating that, "If I was talking about irony, I was talking about a specific form of television irony. Irony well done in print is a beautiful thing that will be around. This sort of smirky, detached sort of self-referential irony will go away. . . . Events like this have historically changed the culture and this is probably no exception."[80] Even the revised statement, however, turned out to be wrong.

56   The first appearance of "terrorist" as a form of slang may have been on an NPR Morning Edition segment in which high school student Reyna Gillead read from her essay about it. "Lately I've noticed a lot of young people using the word 'terrorist' as a form of slang. At my school, one girl talking to her friend screamed out, 'You'd better show up for the party, you terrorist.' I was shocked. I'd never heard the word 'terrorist' used that way. My friends never even used to talk about terrorism, but when a teen-ager calls someone a terrorist or even 'Osama,' it's usually a joking title for a friend, not an enemy. In a way, my friends are taking the seriousness out of the word by making it part of everyday slang. It's fun to invent new words, and it's even better when you know the words shock adults." She concluded by saying, "Calling your friends 'terrorists' may sound bad, but maybe, in a strange way, it's helping us. Just like adults, teen-agers just want everything to go back to normal. . . . If nothing else, it just feels good to be obnoxious again."[81]

57   Toward the end of March, a flurry of stories appeared on such teenage slang then disappeared. On March 19, *The Washington Post* carried a front page article which said that, in teenage slang, messy bedrooms were "ground zero," an ill-tempered teacher was "such a terrorist," and

insignificant problems were "so September 10th." Unstylish clothing instigated the question, "Is that a burqua?" "Weird" kids were "taliban," or they had "anthrax." A Palestinian student was quoted to say that his friends jokingly referred to him as a "terrorist" or "fundamentalist." (He was neither.) In the article, Alan Lippman, director of the Center at Georgetown for the Study of Violence, argued that the slang was an attempt to deal with underlying anxieties of youths who felt that they might be hurt by terrorism. Muslim students would refer to one another as Osama as a way to "take back the power" of such negative words. "What better ways than humor to take those horrible ideas and make them go away?" Lippman asked. Did reporter Emily Wax discuss the matter with Mr. Lippman then find apt students at high schools in the D.C. suburban area? This seems most likely. Or did student interviews lead her to Mr. Lippman's office. The article is unclear. In either case, students in Fairfax, Virginia suggested that the multi-cultural character of the school facilitated the acceptance of such slang.[82] Boston College English Professor Paul Lewis labeled this "terror slang" and organized a panel on it for an academic conference on humor studies.

58   The Scottish *Daily Record* dubbed this a "slang craze,"[83] and Glasgow's *Herald* compared the slang generated by September 11 to the lexicon of new words that sprang up in reaction to earlier conflicts: "trenchcoat" from the First World War, "blitz" from the Second, "brainwash" from the Korean War, and "draft-dodger" from the Vietnam War.[84] *The Independent* in London held that teenagers were "walking a fine line between humour and tastelessness." Then it added three other expressions to the list, none as clever as those in the *Post*: "weapons-grade salsa," "shuicide bomber" (referring shoe-bomber Richard Reed), and "Osamaniac . . . meaning a woman who might find Mr. Bin Laden sexually attractive."[85] The findings of the *Post* article were picked up by a slew of international newspapers, and they were carried across the mass media in the U.S. as well. CBS News did a story on the new lexicon, as did CNN.

59   Only *The Toronto Star* cast some doubt on the authenticity of this supposedly wide-spread phenomenon. The paper compared the terror-slang rage to the "Lexicon of Grunge," reported in *The New York Times* during the heyday of grunge rock. The *Times* attributed clever phrases such as "wack slacks" (old jeans), "bloated, big bag of bloatation" (drunk), "swinging on the flippety flop" (hanging out), and "lamestain" (not cool) to teenagers in Seattle. Unfortunately for the *Times*, the story was based entirely on the word of an intern at Sub Pop Records, and it turned out that he had simply invented the phrases on the spot as a put-on. Never questioning their authenticity, the *Times* reporter completely swallowed the hoax. *The Star* wondered whether some of the interviewed students

might not be putting on the *Post* reporters as well. Were teenager girls really referring to attractive young boys as "firefighter cute?"[86]

60   Whatever the case, the re-emergence of multiple versions of irony in post-9/11 discourses of popular culture has been politically significant. As with the Clear Channel attempt to suppress popular songs, pronouncements that irony is dead reveal how political and cultural authorities view expressions of popular culture as dangerous. Thus irony's resilience is a ground for hope. It shows vitality in popular cultures that refuse submission to internal politics or external forces ("terrorists"). Whether this means that popular cultures can offer meaningful challenges to dominant systems of power is an open question. It warrants a closer look at theories of popular culture.

Popular Cultural Politics

61   These investigations of responses to 9/11 address the subversive potential of popular cultures. Do aspects of popular cultures allow for resistance against authority and social control? Or, as products embedded in transnational capitalism, are popular cultures more likely to support that system, especially by diverting consumers from the social and economic inequities that surround them? In what ways do popular cultures turn the accoutrements of consumerism against the intended manipulations of advertisers and corporate executives, and how do popular cultures amount to sophisticated and playful forms of acquiescence? The issues are complicated in the wake of 9/11, because the ironic playfulness of popular cultures has a double impact. It can wink at the unimaginably horrific, slighting prospects of catastrophic death. Yet it also can challenges the sources of "terror." The Taliban, whatever else might be said about them, showed little sense of irony. That regime did all within its power to eliminate access to global popular cultures.

62   In their postmodern forms, spawned by mass media in the twentieth century, popular cultures have been construed as a political threat by critics on both the right and the left. The publicly stated wish that 9/11 would extinguish the ironic playfulness so often endemic to popular cultures is merely a recent expression of an impulse with much historical precedent.

63   Matthew Arnold was the first and perhaps the greatest conservative critic of popular cultures. According to him, "culture" is "a study of perfection . . . perfection which consists in becoming something rather than in having something." It involves the development of character, nobility. At the same time, culture is the material: the books, the music, the visual arts available to help people along that path. Culture has therapeutic and

political value, since it is "to minister to the diseased spirit of our times." At its best, culture provides grounding or perspective. It aids the spirit "not so much by lending a hand to our friends and countrymen in their *actual operations* for the removal of definite evils, but rather in getting our countrymen to seek culture."[87] The "disease" of the times, according to Arnold, is anarchy. This constitutes the condition of the working classes, the "raw and uncultivated masses" – the "vast, miserable unmanageable masses of sunken people."[88] Arnold saw the working classes as unconstrained and actively agitating against social controls. Only the authority of the state can reassert control, and culture's role is to assist that project.

64 Arnold was unapologetic about his class orientation. The "cultured" classes are the aristocracy and some enlightened segments of the ascending middle classes. These would defend the national interest from the potentially disruptive working classes through a system of education that would "civilize" them. Popular cultures would be eliminated through this system of class hierarchy, with the working classes socialized into docility and obedience. Their culture would be the national culture as defined by their social betters.

65 An explicit class orientation such as Arnold's is virtually absent now from conservative culture critics in the U.S., but that does not prevent echoes of Arnold in their fears of popular cultures.   The absence of class analysis is partly the result of the long-standing illusion of U.S. society as mostly classless, composed almost entirely of a large middle class. Also important is the legacy of the 1960s. Some of the most privileged in the middle classes, adopted culturally (if not always politically) radical stances. This was evident in their devotion to psychedelic drugs, sexual promiscuity, and rock music. In the U.S., the right often defines cultural enemies as what Newt Gingrich named the "McGoverniks" – privileged classes who supported "amnesty, acid, and abortion." Still the fears of cultural disorder voiced by William Bennett, Patrick Buchanan, and Robert Bork echo the earlier concerns of Arnold. Bennett, former "drug czar" and ubiquitous television presence, has edited a *Book of Virtues* firmly in Arnold's mold.[89] Buchanan famously (and disastrously) declared at the 1992 Republican Convention that the U.S. is engaged in an internal "cultural war." Bork's *Slouching Towards Gomorrah* details the decline and fall of American culture – largely from popular music, feminism, and pornography.[90]

66 Critiques of "mass" or popular culture are not confined to the political right. The left has long had a complex relationship to popular cultures.[91] Some of the most systematic and unapologetic criticism of popular culture has come from the Frankfurt School, particularly Theodore

Adorno. The left sometimes finds within popular cultures tendencies opposite to those feared by the right. As John Storey notes, "Whereas Arnold . . . had worried that popular culture represented a threat to cultural and social authority, the Frankfurt School argued that it actually produces the opposite effect; it maintains social authority."[92]

67 Adorno and his colleague Max Horkheimer associated popular cultures with industrialism and commercialism. Popular cultures are produced by an "industry" that reinforces itself. Comedies in which good-natured members of the working classes find humor in their circumstances were painted by Horkheimer and Adorno as attempts at cultural domination. Workers are being transformed into unthinking conformists, pliant to consumer temptations and capitalist ideologies. Popular cultures deprive workers of the imagination necessary to conceive alternative societies, and divert enthusiasm from actions that might lead to achieving changes.

68 Adorno's distaste for popular culture appears with particular clarity in his essay "On Popular Music" in contrast to "serious music." According to Adorno, "A clear judgement concerning the relation of serious music to popular music can be arrived at only by strict attention to the fundamental characteristics of popular music standardization. The whole structure of popular music is standardized, even where the attempt is made to circumvent standardization."[93] The standardization of popular music deprives the whole of any important relation to its various parts. Improvisatory "mistakes" in jazz, Adorno's "dirty notes," would be incorporated by listeners into normalized wholes, becoming politically irrelevant. The aim is to create a "standard reaction" and "pseudo-individualization" to reinforce capitalist ideology.[94] This prepares young people as the "radio generation" for fascist collectivism. "They are most susceptible to a process of masochistic adjustment to authoritarian collectivism."[95] Not so with "serious" music, where every aspect of a piece is essential for grasping the whole and where the entire context is necessary to make sense of each particular. In "serious" music, wrote Adorno, "Every detail derives its musical sense from the concrete totality of the piece which, in turn, consists of the life relationship of the details and never of a mere enforcement of a musical scheme."[96] "Serious music" of the twentieth century, such as Stravinsky's, resists the "cult of the machine." It renounces "dreaming" and adjusts to "raw reality," so that listeners can "reap new pleasure from their acceptance of the unpleasant."[97] New Leftists later joined Adorno in disdain for popular arts.[98]

69 Cultural conservatives on the left and the right diverge on some effects of popular culture, yet they concur that it degrades. It incites instinct, desire, submission, and violence. Political conservatives contend that

popular cultures weaken codes of moral responsibility to unleash a dangerous unruliness. In the view of some leftists, popular cultures undermine the potential for recognizing the inequities of capitalism and exercising the capacities for overcoming it. Critics from the right and the left treat popular cultures in terms of frivolous, commercialized junk. They refuse even to entertain the idea that popular cultures might widen the possibilities for fulfillment, happiness, and enlightenment.

70 The political right and the cultural right align closely in opposing popular cultures, but the left often splits on cultural issues. Cultural populists of the left reject disdain for popular arts. They regard ironical appropriations of popular cultures as potentially important forms of cultural resistance, subversion, and collective recognition to foster political action. Irony enters here as an important concept, because it has been so central to the meaning of twentieth century popular culture and art. Thus Marcel DuChamp placed on display in galleries the most ordinary, even profane products of commodity culture. His urinal and bicycle wheel provoke a multitude of ironical implications for "art" and the aesthetic value of commodities. Andy Warhol advanced this project another step by showing how art objects can be found not only among commodities but also their packaging and marketing. By appropriating the commercial into art, Warhol both resisted and embraced the pervasiveness of commodity culture. He removed the "in-itself" from artistic meaning and overcame the gap between "high" and "popular" arts. These innovations in irony have endured. As Iain Chambers has put it, "Pop Art remained a cool, ironic exercise in definition confusion that left in its wake a tension that could no longer be ignored."[99]

71 Popular culture continues to draw on its ironic potential to maintain its allure. The Elvis cult, reruns of "Happy Days," Cher's exhibitionism, the tikki kitsch of "Survivor," all things Hulk Hogan: each has a certain winsome appeal, but each relies on irony for that appeal to work. To cultivate "serious" (high) cultural aspirations is often the kiss of death for figures in the popular culture. Punk rock, perhaps the most ironic of all musical forms, initially at least, was inspired partly by disgust for pop musicians who took themselves too seriously. Johnny Rotten was said to have been discovered by Malcolm McClaren sporting an "I Hate Pink Floyd" t-shirt.

72 Recently a school of leftist cultural populism has emerged to embrace the myriad ways to read productions of popular culture. Even when these are the inventions of a vast array of multi-national conglomerates for communications, they can become in the hands of ordinary people vehicles for endless ironical reversals. Chambers recognizes that popular cultures now are products of a system of industrial capitalism. "The

visual collage, accompanying us from morning to night, is a product of the three giant forces of the contemporary world: industrialization, capitalism, and urbanization. And the power of the images that these processes have produced . . . is inescapable." He acknowledges that these creations are "artificial" and that capitalism is manufacturing "false desires" and "controlling our tastes" to manipulate publics.[100] Yet the meanings that emerge from this system are not determined entirely by the processes of production. "Set against the gloomy predictions of a media-induced totalitarianism," Chambers observes, "there is the daily, inventive evidence of local control, local meanings, and a continual construction of sense that passes beyond the instrument logic of the 'culture industry.'"[101] Artifacts of the popular culture have meanings that cannot be contained by "mechanized" logic. Once released into the cultural marketplace, the artifacts of commodity culture take on lives of their own. "The programme, magazine or item of clothing is not simply an ideological statement to be accepted or denied; its possible meanings are not exhausted by ideology; it rarely offers a straightforward example of obvious incorporation or resistance."[102]

73   John Fiske maintains that texts of popular culture should be evaluated by their capacities to inspire multiple and potentially subversive interpretations. A text ambiguous or interesting enough to facilitate alternative readings is a better text than one that does not. Fiske contrasts "writerly" texts to "producerly" ones. Writerly texts define the domain of the *avant garde* in requiring highly disciplined activities of interpretation. They are not judged by accessibility to audiences; often they are valued for the obverse, making themselves inaccessible, indecipherable, or shocking. The *avant garde* earns applause for "making strange" the world. Popular texts, on the other hand, are "producerly." A popular text "does not challenge the reader to make sense out of it, does not faze the reader with its sense of shocking difference both from other texts and from the everyday. It does not impose laws of its own construction that readers have to decipher in order to read it in terms of its, rather than their, choosing." Accessibility does not eliminate possibilities for audience participation in re-creating the text, which "can theoretically be read in that easy way by those readers who are comfortably accommodated within the dominant ideology." Yet it is open enough to expose, "however reluctantly, the vulnerabilities, limitations, and weaknesses of its preferred meanings; it contains, while attempting to repress them, voices that contradict the ones it prefers; it has loose ends that escape its control, its meanings exceed its own power to discipline them, its gaps are wide enough for whole new texts to be produced in them – it is, in a very real sense, beyond its own control."[103]

74 Fiske's analysis of popular cultures is optimistic. Few popular artifacts seem to strike him as failing standards for producerly texts with subversive potentialities. He applauds *Dallas*, *90210*, and Disneyworld. Marketplace products are, in his view, all potential tools for disrupting systems of cultural domination. This populism provides a valuable alternative to the cultural snobbery of Arnold and Adorno, but it might be too generous. By embracing popular cultures for their possible effects, it ignores, and perhaps denies, aesthetic distinctions. Simon Firth has criticized populist views on precisely these grounds.[104] Should such works only be valued for their capacities to generate oppositional readings? If so, he asks, how do we know whether they are achieving this result? A sociological analysis would seem in order to determine the impacts of popular-cultural works on audiences; but this is difficult to configure and conduct, and almost never undertaken. Consumers of popular cultures seldom debate the capacities of their favorite television programs or rock albums to generate resistant interpretations. Yet popular culture, to paraphrase Firth, is an "argument that anyone can join." The argument is less about capacities for resistance than qualities. Academic critics would do well to meet popular cultures on the same grounds that consumers do: evaluating works of art more than modes of resistance.

75 Nonetheless Fiske is correct that the accessibility of popular culture is a great strength. Despite attempts by producers and distributors to manage popular culture, it seldom slips fully under their control. In fact, a popular culture entirely under the control of film producers or record executives probably would prove unmarketable. Popular cultures need interventions from audiences to stay accessible, fashionable, hip. The relationships of audiences and producers, to determine who wields what power, are matters of protracted struggle, negotiation, and invention.

Conclusion

76 The attacks of September 11 revealed both the political power and the political limits of popular culture. The Clear Channel efforts to manage playlists recognized that productions of popular culture, especially popular musics, could disrupt attempts by authorities to build support for the political and military responses forthcoming. At this point, even the slightest disruptions seemed dangerous. Yet reaction against the Clear Channel policy demonstrated the power and vitality of popular culture, and an eventual recognition that its suppression would not be a simple undertaking. Important to this vitality are liberal discourses for marketplaces of commodities and ideas as well as against censorship. That Clear Channel managers did not anticipate possible reactions

against their attempts at repression indicates that they misunderstood the meanings and values that various publics draw from the cultural materials over which the corporation exercises considerable control.

77 If the disruptive potential of popular culture resides largely in the imaginative capacities of consumers to find alternatives there, as Fiske suggests, the suppression of particular kinds of materials might not be telling. Audiences can still make use of what is available to support possible doubts about conduct of the "war against terrorism" or other acts. If the aesthetic and political contents of popular cultures matter immensely, as Firth contends, the centralized control of popular cultures implied in the wake of 9/11 could be crucial. In either case, attempts by corporations and governments to suppress powerful expressions in popular cultures probably will continue, and they might even be relatively effective over time.

78 Pronouncements of the "death of irony" represent another kind of attempt to manage popular cultures. Some critics greeted with delight the thought that 9/11 would undermine the unruliness of irony in our popular cultures. Terrorist attacks were to wipe the collective smirk from the faces of a generation of Seinfeldian slackers. But irony, as anybody should have known, did not disappear. Its value in politics is important, if limited. Irony has not and probably cannot bear the principal burden for responding to our situations. Yet it has provoked alternatives to the heavy-handed moralism of Bush and Ashcroft. Ultimately irony may mark the limited political roles that popular cultures can play in political resistance and transformation. They can provide cultural groundwork for challenging a system of domination, even if they cannot prove sufficient to overthrow it. More adventurous forms of political activism may be necessary for that.

Notes

[1]   Darrell Giles, "Touchy Lyrics Tune Out 150 Songs," *Courier Mail*, September 20, 2001, p. 9.

[2]   Giles Coren, "Banned Songs," *Times* [London], September 20, 2001, p. 1.

[3]   Mark Brown, "150 Songs Yanked from Radio Playlists: Clear Channel Pulls Tunes with Perceived Connections to Attacks," *Rocky Mountain News*, September 19, 2001, p. 6A.

[4]   Ken Hoffman, "Radio Stations Show Sensitivity," *Houston Chronicle*, September 20, 2001, p. 1.

[5]   Giles, "Touchy Lyrics Tune Out 150 Songs," p. 9.

[6]   "Anti-War Anthem Off Airwaves Again," *Dominion* [Wellington], September 25, 2001, p. 2.

[7]   Neil Strauss, "After the Horror, Radio Stations Pull Some Songs," *New York Times*, September 19, 2001, p. 1E.

[8]   Eliza Truitt, "It's the End of the World as Clear Channel Knows It," *Slate*, September 17, 2001, http://slate.msn.com/default.aspx?id=1008314.

[9]   Jim Slotek, "Attacks Lead to Collateral Damage," *Toronto Sun*, September 19, 2001, p. 63.

[10]   Steve Jones, "No. 1 Radio Chain Didn't Ban Songs," *USA Today*, September 20, 2001, p. 4D.

[11]   Andy Voung and Percy Ednalino, "Stations Pull Songs Over Lyrics' Mental Connection to Terrorism Feared," *Denver Post*, September 19, 2001, p. 1A.

[12]   Neil Strauss, "After the Horror, Radio Stations Pull Some Songs," *New York Times*, September 19, 2001, p. 1E.

[13]   Jennifer Barrs, "List Didn't Ban Songs, Clear Channel Says," *Tampa Tribune*, September 19, 2001, p. 12.

[14]   Pamela Davis, "Radio Gets Patriotic," *St. Petersburg Times*, September 19, 2001, p. 2B.

[15]   Eliza Truitt, "Profiles in Ass Covering," *Slate*, September 18, 2001, http://slate.msn.com/default.aspx?id=1008318.

[16]   Davis, "Radio Gets Patriotic," p. 2B.

[17]   Editorial, "Hitting the Wrong Note," *Los Angeles Times*, September 19, 2001, p. 10B.

[18]   George Varga, "September 11 Caused a Change of Tune," *San Diego Union-Tribune*, December 30, 2001, p. F8.

[19]   Chris Kaltenbach, "If You Can't Sing Anything Nice, Don't Sing at

All," *Baltimore Sun*, September 23, 2001, p. 2E.

[20]   Ed Masley, "Imagine Giving Peace a Chance through Song," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, September 20, 2001, p. C2.

[21]   Coren, "Banned Songs," p. 1.

[22]   "Urban Legends Reference Pages: Rumors of War (Radio, Radio)," http://www.snopes2.com/rumors/radio.htm.

[23]   *Ibid.*

[24]   *Ibid.*

[25]   James W. Brock, "Antitrust, the 'Relevant Market,' and the Vietnamization of American Merger Policy," *Antitrust Bulletin*, 14, Winter, 2001, p. 737.

[26]   *Ibid.*

[27]   John Kiesewetter, *Cincinnati Enquirer Online*, 19 March 2000, http://enquirer.com/editions/ 2000/03/19/fin_big_radio_airs_sound.html.

[28]   Leeds, "Clear Channel: An Empire Built on Deregulation," *Los Angeles Times*, February 25, 2002, p. 1C.

[29]   Brock, "Antitrust," p. 737.

[30]   Jeff Leeds, "Clear Channel," p. 1C.

[31]   Chris Riemenschneider, "Clear Channel Expands in Small Concert Venues," *Star Tribune* (Minneapolis), March 6, 2002, p. 1D.

[32]   Leeds, "Clear Channel," p. 1C.

[33]   Brock, "Antitrust," p. 737.

[34]   *Ibid.*

[35]   Leeds, "Clear Channel," p. 1C.

[36]   Jeff Leeds, "How Many Stations Does Clear Channel Communications Inc. Really Own?" *Los Angeles Times*, March 12, 2002, p. 1C.

[37]   "Congressman Calls for Clear Channel Probe," *Los Angeles Times*,

January 24, 2002, p. 2C.

[38]   Leeds, "Clear Channel," p. 1C.

[39]   Dorothy Pomerantz, "Free the Airwaves," *Forbes*, April 15, 2002, p. 106.

[40]   The recording industry recently settled lawsuits against four students who had set up file-sharing services on their campuses: Amy Harmon, "Recording Industry Goes After Students Over Music Sharing," *New York Times,* April 25, 2003, p. 1. Reports have surfaced that the industry is considering electronic viruses as a potential weapon against illicit-file sharers: Andrew Ross Sorkin, "Software Bullet Is Sought to Kill Musical Piracy," *New York Times,* May 4, 2003, p. 1.

[41]   While the rate determinations by the Library of Congress were half of what was being asked by the RIAA, they are still expected to put many small operators out of business. See "Internet Radio Fees Halved," *ProSoundNews Online*, June 25, 2002, http://www.prosoundnews.com/stories/ 2002/june/0625.1.shtml.

[42]   "Internet Radio Fees Halved," *ProSoundNews Online*, June 25, 2002, http://www.prosoundnews.com/stories/ 2002/june/0625.1.shtml.

[43]   Roger Catlin, "WHCN Softens Rock: Good bye AC/DC; Hello America, Elton John, Creed," *Hartford Courant*, March 5, 2002, p. 1D.

[44]   *Ibid.*

[45]   "Internet Radio Fees Halved," *ProSoundNews Online*, June 25, 2002, http://www.prosoundnews.com/stories/ 2002/june/0625.1.shtml.

[46]   *Ibid.*

[47]   Brown, "150 Songs Yanked from Radio Playlists," p. 6A.

[48]   Strauss, p. 1E.

[49]   *Schenk v. U.S.* 249 U.S. 47, 1919.

[50]   *Brandenburg v. Ohio*, 395 U.S. 444, 1969.

[51]   Tom Brazaitis, "Lamenting the Death of Free Speech," *Plain Dealer*, September 30, 2001, p. H3.

[52]   *Ibid.*

[53]   J. A. K. Thomson, *Irony: An Historical Introduction*, London, Allen and Unwin, 1926.

[54]   Wayne C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1974.

[55]   *Ibid.*, pp. 105-134.

[56]   Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony, with Constant Reference to Socrates*, Lee M. Chapel, trans., Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1956, p. 265.

[57]   Jedediah Purdy, *For Common Things: Irony, Trust, and Commitment in America Today*, New York, Vintage, 1999.

[58]   *Ibid.*, p. 18.

[59]   *Ibid.*, p. 9.

[60]   *Ibid.*, p. 11.

[61]   *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

[62]   *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.

[63]   *Ibid.*, p. 19.

[64]   *Ibid.*, p. 20.

[65]   *Ibid.*, p. 24.

[66]   *Ibid.*, p. 24.

[67]   *Ibid.*, p. 25.

[68]   Quoted in Kevin Mattson, "Irony's Irony: Jedediah Purdy and the Plight of the Young Writer," *Social Policy*, Spring, 2001.

[69]   Caleb Crain, "Book Review: *For Common Things*," *Salon.com*, September 7, 1999, http://www.salon.com/books/review/1999/09/07/purdy/.

[70]   *Ibid.*

[71]   One person's irony is another's sincerity. Jen Chaney offered it as evidence that it was indicative of a move away from '90s irony toward a post-millenial "schmaltz," a "carefully crafted tale that blended mystery

with the art of story telling." See "Feelin' Groovy: How the '90s Dismissed the Importance of Being Earnest – and How a New Decade Just Might Rekindle the Schmaltz," *PopPolitics.com*, http://www.poppolitics.com/articles/2000-12-26-earnestness.shtml.

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73   Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 89.

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75   Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony*, p. 28.

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89   William Bennett, ed., *The Book of Virtues: A Treasury of Great Moral Stories*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1993.

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91   See Paul R. Gorman, *Left Intellectuals and Popular Culture in Twentieth Century America*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1997.

92   John Storey, ed., *An Introduction to Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, Athens, University of Georgia Press, 1998.

93   Theodor W. Adorno, "On Popular Music," *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, p. 197.

94   *Ibid.*, pp. 202-203.

95   *Ibid.*, p. 207.

96   *Ibid.*, p. 198.

97   *Ibid.*, p. 207.

98   In *One Dimensional Man*, a book concerned centrally with aesthetics, Marcuse does not confront what we often think of now as popular culture directly, but he does so by implication in his various criticisms of the place of art in one-dimensional society. For example, he states, "The truth of literature and art has always been granted (if it was granted at all) as one of a 'higher' order, which should not and indeed did not disturb the order of business. What has changed in the contemporary period is the difference between the two orders and their truths. The absorbent power of society depletes the artistic dimension by assimilating its antagonistic contents. In the realm of culture, the new totalitarianism manifests itself precisely in a harmonizing pluralism, where the most contradictory works and truths peacefully coexist in indifference." See Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advance Industrial Society*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1964, p. 61.

99   Iain Chambers, *Popular Culture: The Metropolitan Experience*, London, Methuen, 1986, p. 10.

[100] *Ibid.*, pp. 69-70.

[101] *Ibid.*, p. 118.

[102] *Ibid.*, pp. 207-208.

[103] John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture*, Boston, Unwin Hyman, 1989, p. 104.

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