

Middlebrow Media and the Politics of Contemporary Fiction

Andrew McCann

LATE IN 2014, WRITING IN THE LITERATURE PAGES OF THE MELBOURNE *AGE*, THE CRITIC Jane Sullivan bravely 'outed' herself.

This isn't easy, but it's time I came clean. I hope you will still respect me once I've made my confession. I'm a middlebrow reader. There. I've said it. I'm out. And you know what? I'm proud. Stand shoulder to shoulder with me, fellow middlebrows, because we're changing the literary world. (29)

Of course there is an element of frivolousness to this. Sullivan was, after all, merely introducing Beth Driscoll's book on what Driscoll calls 'the new literary middlebrow'. But it is hard to ignore the exaggerated character of Sullivan's investments. In overcoming the crushing social stigma of being a middlebrow reader she also produced a vision of popular agency that asserts itself against aesthetic prejudices and residual notions of cultural capital. The enthusiasm with which she embraces a term that, until fairly recently, was most often used as a derogatory marker of inferior taste points, albeit imprecisely, to a new wave of scholarship that revisits the terrain of the middlebrow, partly in order to renegotiate the relationship between aesthetic value and broader notions of social utility, and partly as a defense of popular reading practices. The synergies between literary culture and the mass media are central to this work. So too is a cautious optimism, or at least an open-mindedness, in regard to the effects of recreational reading, whether it be orchestrated by Oprah Winfrey's Book Club or the review pages of the broadsheet press (or what is left of it). While this work often builds on earlier scholarship that has a period focus (a period usually coextensive with

modernism), it also claims a topicality that hinges on a renewed conception of the politics of reading that defers to ordinary consumers of texts. This deferral implicitly acknowledges the importance of a large, non-specialist public to any conception of the broader social relevance of contemporary writing.

Brigid Rooney's recent work on 'literary activism' is one example of what I have in mind. Rooney examines the ability of widely read 'literary' authors to focus political discussion. Broad circulation is a part of this process. This also means that we have to rethink the assumption that an antipathy to instrumental or commercial logics grounds the progressive political valences of literary texts. As Rooney explains, the ability of writers to function as non-expert political commentators for a broad public hinges on 'a commitment to literary-field-related values of freedom and autonomy' (183) but it also demands that assumptions about aesthetic autonomy are modified, or attenuated, in the interests of the market for recreational reading. Of Tim Winton, Rooney writes,

His novels orient themselves to a new 'middlebrow' readership, to those seeking a quality reading experience but unwilling or unable to invest the time required for more arcane, difficult or inaccessible texts. Winton's fiction embraces a broad readership, offering accessibility and quite immediate reward. Yet it bears the traces of an older literary disposition, referencing its cultural inheritance. (186-7)

The point could be made with regard to any number of writers: Junot Díaz, Zadie Smith, Christos Tsiolkas, Jonathan Franzen—bestselling literary figures whose marketability is bound up with the support of large publishers and media outlets, the repudiation of any real formal difficulty, but also the corresponding sense that their books have a social value that merely escapist forms of culture consumption don't. It is precisely in this space of commercial compromise and incorporation that literature seems to enter into the broader circuits of opinion formation that are central to the possibility of an educated, liberal citizenry. This isn't Sullivan's vision of middlebrow readers transforming the literary world, but it does suggest that a middlebrow readership is central to the ways in which literary culture disseminates values and galvanises public consciousness, and it does, finally, validate the choices of non-academic readers who, like Sullivan, take literature seriously without really needing to explain why. From this perspective the term 'middlebrow' isn't at all derogatory. It simply points to the processes by which recreational reading acquires a value in excess of what the term 'recreation' implies. This can be a matter of cultural capital, but it can also imply the working through of broader social and political issues.

Beth Driscoll's book *The New Literary Middlebrow: Tastemakers and Reading in the Twenty-First Century*, which draws on a good deal of American scholarship circling

around this topic, amplifies the relationship between market technologies and the normative moorings of recreational reading. For Driscoll, middlebrow texts orient to middle-class notions of leisure, and they imply a qualitative dimension evident in the earnestness, reverence and emotional investment that readers bring to them. But crucially the term middlebrow also designates a series of relationships between texts and the forms of media that help them circulate. Relationships between readers and the texts they consume are thus also functions of the media vectors out of which these texts emerge. Middlebrow texts, by virtue of the ways in which they circulate, repudiate suppositions about the autonomy of the literary precisely because they are visibly integrated into ‘commercial distribution networks’ (23) and ‘new media formats’ (25). In fact, Driscoll’s insistence on the word ‘new’ to qualify the middlebrow points to the role of ‘the globalized twenty-first century mass media’, notably broadcast and online book clubs, which raise the stakes by virtue of their ability to organise potentially huge readerships (58). This is, I think, the really salient point to come out of work on the middlebrow, and the one that lets us get at the issues embedded in what can seem like a thoroughly anachronistic concept. For both Rooney and Driscoll there is at least the implicit assumption that commercial incorporation can enhance rather than impede political, or more broadly social, efficacy. Both open up the possibility of thinking expansively and non-prejudicially about the political effects of reading practices driven by the market. And for Driscoll at least the term middlebrow has as much to do with contemporary media forms as with the intrinsic qualities of particular texts or the hierarchies of taste to which they correspond. Of course the extent to which this version of the middlebrow is new or innovative remains debatable. Foundational work on the middlebrow published in the 1990s—Janice Radway’s *A Feeling for Books* and Joan Shelley Rubin’s *The Making of Middlebrow Culture*, for instance—clearly stresses the dependence of middlebrow cultural formations on medial or intermedial structures. Whereas reflexively derogatory uses of the term reproduce a form of cultural capital based on anachronistic notions of taste and discernment, work on the middlebrow produced over the last twenty-five years also foregrounds institutions, agencies, and commercial/industrial practices that produce a public of readers. In fact, if the sense of middling in the term middlebrow designates a space between the poles of high and low culture, it also contains another set of connotations that become clear as soon as we recall that the word ‘middle’ and the word ‘medial’ are synonyms. As Rubin stresses, the culture of the middlebrow is also a culture of mediators (‘Rethinking the Creation of Cultural Hierarchy in America’, 11).

As important as this observation is, it doesn’t quite manage to disentangle questions of mediatization from questions of taste and discernment. Elsewhere Rubin argues that middlebrow culture hinges on the democratic confounding of the opposition between high and low culture. By this reckoning, the “‘middleness” of middlebrow culture’ consists in the merging of ‘pontifical expertise’ and the idea

of consumer satisfaction (*The Making of Middlebrow Culture*, 144): mediators construct a middle ground, or a space of compromise, that constitutes the foreground of analysis, while the fact that this possibility is dependent on a discrete set of media practices (advertising, subscription, broadsheet reviewing, and reading guides, for instance) is visible as a kind of backdrop, or a precondition.

The term 'medial' is, in other words, assumed but also subsumed by the term 'middle'. This is an important aspect of how the concept of the middlebrow functions in contemporary scholarship. Virtually all scholarly work on the middlebrow locates the initial currency of the term in a modernist or new critical reaction against commercial practices associated with the industrialisation of the book trade. The interwar years are crucial in this respect, while figures like Virginia Woolf, F.R. Leavis or Clement Greenberg are often evoked to typify a more diffuse kind of disdain for the commercialisation of good taste.¹ Much of this work focuses on the ways in which industrialisation and the emergence of mass consumption were imagined as gendered. As Radway puts it in her study of the Book-of-the-Month Club, concerns about the publishing industry and the literary field more generally were 'informed by a profound gender anxiety prompted by the threat of women's changed social situation and by modern feminism. This anxiety made itself felt within the literary field as a form of deep distaste for the purported feminization of culture and the emasculation of otherwise assertive artists and aggressively discriminating readers' (*A Feeling for Books*, 189). What emerges here is a habitus in which notions of taste and discernment mask a struggle to retrieve and legitimise the role of women's reading in a predominantly patriarchal society. Hierarchies of taste, in other words, validate or marginalise particular, socially produced experiences in a way that normalises hegemonic relations of production. A feminist, or more broadly subaltern, cultural politics, by contrast, can consist in retrieving the political content of what has hitherto been dismissed as bad taste.

While this remains an important and topical project, it also insists on de-emphasising anxieties about mass media by making them a function of this relay between taste and gender. In this paradigm, the critique of mass media provoked

¹ As David Carter puts it, 'Historians on both sides of the Atlantic have identified the 1920s as the decade in which the middlebrow was named and its characteristic institutions established. Here the concept of over-determination sounds like a form of understatement: changes in publishing, bookselling, consumption, and reading practices, the emergence of new cultural media and new critical institutions, ideological responses to the First World War, urbanization, professionalization, and shifts in class relations might all be cited in order to explain the context for the emergence of middlebrow culture' (175). The opposition between modernism and the middlebrow is virtually ubiquitous across the relevant scholarship, and is frequently deployed as an opening gambit. In 1992, Rubin drew attention to Woolf and Greenberg (xiii); in 2015 Tom Perrin wrote that 'those who objected to the middlebrow were very often partisans of modernism'. He goes on to cite Woolf, Leavis and the critics of the *Partisan Review* (6).

by middlebrow dissemination is a sort of Trojan horse that conceals hierarchies of taste that reinforce forms of social and cultural marginalisation. One of the consequences of this is that questions around media, or around the structures organising consumption, get a bit flattened and we fall back onto a view of mediatisation as a delivery system connecting already constituted subjects and objects, rather than as a force that generates their conditions of possibility. The pattern established here informs work on popular reading much more generally. As we will see, it means that an oppositional politics of reading tends to be circumscribed by structures organising consumption. The result is that critique itself reproduces the conceptual limits of the media forms with which it is engaged.

This is where I want to begin. To say that questions of mediatisation and questions of taste tend to get confused in discussions of the middlebrow actually conceals a more fundamental problem which can be formulated, provisionally, as follows: precisely because discussions of the middlebrow repeatedly confuse questions of media and questions of taste, they also effectively limit the possibility of articulating relationships between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic media networks. In fact, we could go a bit further: the point at which discussions of media tip back into discussion of taste is often the point at which a kind of market- or consumer-oriented thinking limits critique in the interests of the quantitative logics at its center. At some point this limiting of critique encounters the opaqueness of media themselves, not least in the arcanum of private corporations that, from the point of view of academic research, are difficult to access (Radway's research on the Book-of-the-Month Club is a rare exception). But let me be clear: I'm not pointing this out in the interests of displacing putatively middlebrow networks of circulation or to disparage their populism. Anyone who is interested in the political effects of contemporary literature has to take seriously claims made about the confluence of progressive politics and commercial logics that underpin a lot of recent work on middlebrow literary media. But at the same time the tendency of this work to confuse market technologies and popular—in the strong sense of counter-hegemonic—consciousness seems like the reflexive thinking of a wishful neoliberalism invested in the redemptive, democratic potential of market forces.

My aim in this essay is to work with some fairly broad brushstrokes. Firstly, I want to explore the entanglement of questions of media with questions of taste to show that, even in the strongest work on middlebrow culture, this entanglement limits the scope of the discussion. Part of the currency of the term might even rest on this confusion and the effects it produces. Secondly, I want to suggest that grasping this limit is important to understanding both the potential of large-scale commercial structures that endow recreational reading with value, and the possibility of formulating alternatives to them. In the latter part of the essay I want to touch on the recent work of the German novelist and cultural critic Friedrich von Borries as

an example of how new media can work both with and against commercial forms of distribution in a way that abandons outmoded notions of aesthetic autonomy, while remaining true to the spirit of non-identity that drives them. The stakes here are both conceptual and political. As John Guillory has pointed out in a brilliant excavation of what he calls the 'media concept', the residual distinction between traditional fine arts and technological media has inhibited the 'development of a general sociology of culture on the basis of communication and the correlative processes of mediation' (354). The problem reproduces itself in the spurious opposition between art works that maintain a relative autonomy in regard to commercial structures and related forms of technological media, and those that are incorporated into them. This is, for Guillory, the 'dilemma of the cultural disciplines founded on the older scheme of the fine arts; these disciplines manifest a falsely residual character because they remain theoretically unintegrated into the system of the media' (360). Work on the middlebrow both addresses and reinforces this dilemma. It allows us to grasp the democratic impulse bound up with the integration of texts into the system of the media, or as Guillory elsewhere puts it the 'task of mediating high culture for a mass audience' ('The Ordeal of Middlebrow Culture', 83). At the same time, however, it understands critiques of the middlebrow, or related forms of modernist culture, in terms of the residual impulse that Guillory identifies: the fiction of disembodied creativity or discernment is oddly literalised in forms of 'high' culture that either don't have any discernible material underpinnings, or that function in the interests of a cultural elite by obfuscating them. The importance of von Borries' project in this context is that it attempts to rearticulate resistance to dominant forms of media in the space of a diversified media environment: forms of critique associated with a refusal of the media system, in other words, are integrated into that system and potentially energised by its possibilities.

Janice Radway's work on middlebrow distribution and popular reading practices remains crucial to this field of inquiry. Her research on the Book-of-the-Month Club takes us deep inside the everyday reality of an organisation that, for much of the twentieth century, was central to the development of an American readership invested in the value of its recreational practices. This work is also terrifically lucid in its mapping of the debates around commercialisation and industrialisation that accompanied the consolidation of this readership. One of the things Radway brings to light is an anxiety around mass media that was central to the way these debates played out. Critics of the Book-of-the-Month Club, for instance, could dwell on the 'assembly-line book distribution method' that they saw as creating a 'mediocre, Fordized literature' (*A Feeling for Books*, 189). Central to this was the Book-of-the-Month Club's selection and distribution of books for what appeared to be a large, but increasingly passive readership. Ultimately this turned out to be

a boon for commercial publishers who could orient their editorial policies to an already established distribution network, as F.R Leavis pointed out in *Mass Civilization and Minority Culture*, which anticipates some of Radway's insights, albeit by way of vehement opposition to the book club phenomenon.² In contrast, critics of the club imagined a kind of literary space that operated independently not just of commercial structures and logics, but also independently of media forms that were understood as industrial in character. This fantasy of independence rested on the idea of a rational, discriminating reader who stood for individuality in opposition to 'machine production and mass consumption' (*A Feeling for Books*, 203). It also reflected the conceptual problem Guillory identifies: the development of new technological media at the end of the nineteenth century produced a distinction between the 'older system of the arts' and 'media of any kind' (321-2).

Radway doesn't really dispute the idea that the Book-of-the-Month Club constituted a medial structure that homogenised both production and consumption, although the nuances in her discussion also qualify this. The sharp edge of her critique is reserved for people like Waldo Frank who, she points out, were driven by a paranoia about the loss of control over cultural production. This paranoia was also consistently gendered. The fantasy of discriminating readers seeking out original authors operating beyond the structures of the culture industry grounds notions of taste in the material structures of patriarchy; anxieties about women's agency are displaced onto or replayed as anxieties about forms of culture consumption tightly bound up with commercial production and distribution. What Radway doesn't really dwell upon is the fact that fantasies of discrimination merely mask other kinds of medial structures. Defenders of autonomy and discernment aren't especially interested in elucidating these structures. To do so would be to acknowledge that the media concept describes the material basis of cultural production. Notions of taste and discrimination, as Pierre Bourdieu has argued, derive their efficacy from suspending any interrogation of their material underpinnings: the 'pure' gaze of the 'aesthetic disposition' has to appear unmediated in order to conceal its materiality (3). The issue of something like modernist media is, of course, outside the already expansive scope of Radway's book. Nevertheless I do think we can say that some of the force of her work depends on leaving in place an opposition between the fantasy of immediacy associated with aesthetic discrimination, and a tangible engagement with the materiality of mediatization that is part of the quotidian reality of the Book-of-the-Month Club. What is forestalled here is the idea that

² See F.R Leavis, *Mass Civilization and Minority Culture*, where, drawing on Gilbert Russell's *Advertisement Writing*, he suggests that the ultimate effect of book guilds and clubs is the standardisation of demand, and a corresponding rationalisation of production that helps to minimise the risk of market failure (22-3).

what might be at stake are competing or parallel media networks. The lacuna in the critique of mass media, in other words, is reproduced as the foundation of Radway's discussion: 'however much both modernist and other avant-garde artistic movements sought deliberately to oppose the depredations of capitalist economy and the various material and social forces of production on which it depended, what they sometimes set up in opposition to those forces was actually an older model of the subject, the literary equivalent of the liberal individual, that is, the creative genius, the heroic poet, the romantic artist, "the author"' (*A Feeling for Books*, 218).

Radway's use of the qualifier 'sometimes' here indicates her uncertainty about the point, and insinuates the possibility of anti-capitalist cultural practices as materially grounded as the forms of commercial media they sought to refuse. For scholars invested in modernism or the avant-garde, the point barely needs rehearsing. The issue is evident, albeit in a different register, a little later when Radway scrutinises the idea of the public sphere that ultimately underpins modernist critiques of the middlebrow. The basic problem here was that integration into a commercial media environment was seen as undermining the possibility of independent choice and discernment: 'disinterested rational deliberation about the intrinsic qualities of important books was segregated from and defined diacritically as free by its opposition to the contingent investments and maneuvers of self-interested committees operating always to maximise various forms of personal profit' (*A Feeling for Books*, 231). This is of a piece with the Habermasian idea of the bourgeois public sphere, which draws a line connecting disinterested literary debate and debate per se. As Michael Warner, among others, has shown us, this idea of disinterested interaction conceals the white, male moorings of the subject that masquerades as universal, according to the differential basis on which self-abstraction is available as a social resource (239). The bourgeois public sphere, in other words, is a structure that produces a specific kind of constituency. Radway's recuperative reading of the Book-of-the-Month Club hinges in no small part on its ability to address the exclusionary character of bourgeois publicity partly through the democratic character of consumption itself.

The commodity, it seems to me, whether it was a car, a refrigerator, or a mass-produced book, at least potentially threatened to erase the distinctions whereby whiteness, maleness, and the command of both property and print were constituted as the absent conditions of privilege. It threatened to enable millions to erase the marks of their subordinate embodiment with the standardized, uniform trademarks of incorporated American business ... It should be clear now why the book clubs and other middlebrow agencies devoted to the marketing of culture as just another consumer product proved so threatening. In

packaging and selling cultural objects as if they were no different from soup, soap, or automobiles, these organizations threatened to obliterate the fundamental distinction that underwrote this entire system of privilege, that is, the distinction between the material and immaterial, between the particularities of the body and the universality of the intellect, in short, between the natural and the cultural. (*A Feeling for Books*, 244-5)

In this statement the homogenising effects of the commodity anticipate a radical dismantling of established hierarchies, and the possibility of a common culture dependent on consumer capitalism. What is at stake here is not so much an opposition between different materialities or different media networks, but an opposition between the illusion, the subterfuge, of discernment and materiality itself. But as Radway also points out, the view of the American public sphere elaborated by people like Harry Scherman (the founder of the Book-of-the-Month Club) was very similar to the Habermasian model oriented to the 'expression and working-out of a universal public good' (*A Feeling for Books*, 234). And in fact, when recent critics like Rooney and Driscoll evoke the normative potential of middlebrow reading, it is really only against this notion of public discourse that their arguments make sense. Without accompanying notions of rational opinion formation and the possibility of constituencies based on them, recreational reading remains one more kind of leisure activity distinguished from others according to hierarchies of taste. Beyond that, though, it is very difficult to see how the false universality of discernment isn't reproduced, or even exacerbated, in the false universality of consumerism. That Radway's qualified defense of the Book-of-the-Month Club is caught in this structure of repetition shouldn't drive us back to outmoded notions of discrimination, but it should prompt us to think with renewed energy about alternative structures of mediatisation. A vision of the *res publica* in which the democratising effects of consumerism redistribute cultural capital for what Radway calls a new 'professional-managerial class' (*A Feeling for Books*, 276) isn't something to be dismissed. But from the point of view of a contemporary cultural politics, its implicit defense of middle-class life and middle-class consumption also feels very insular.

The circularity of the debates Radway's book examines reflects the much broader problem of discussing media networks independently of notions of taste and discrimination that posit a fictional notion of independence and immediacy. In work on the middlebrow, it is important to evoke this fiction, partly because it is the counterpoint that brings media themselves into focus. The other side of this coin is the ease with which notions of aesthetic autonomy resistant to the incursions of commercial, governmental or instrumental logics function as a kind of default setting for critics of market technologies. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's critique of the culture industry, F.R. Leavis' juxtaposition of mass

and minority culture, and Dwight Macdonald's notion of the 'midcult', for example, all orient to this sense of autonomy, but so does Pascale Casanova's much more recent and topical vision of commercialised fiction that 'mimics the style of the modern novel', and her insistence that recent publishing history revolves around a tension between a 'commercial pole' and an 'autonomous pole' (169). All of these models hold onto the possibility of a form of literary production that is relatively autonomous in regard to commercial imperatives. They are also deeply suspicious of the integration of ostensibly 'high' or autonomous forms of literary production into commercial structures. Work on the middlebrow, by contrast, sees the incorporation of literature into commercial structures and media networks as actualising the political potential of literary culture, but in so doing it risks reducing our sense of the possibilities inherent in technological media to those that embody the dubious confluence of consumer culture, market forces and democratisation.

The idea of actualising democratic possibilities in this context seems to rest on circulation, which is to say a quantitative notion of readership or audience. The scholarship on a more recent incarnation of the Book-of-the-Month Club concept, Oprah Winfrey's Book Club, vividly foregrounds the tensions around the incorporation of literary texts into popular forms of broadcast and digital media. While Janice Peck and Nicole Aschoff see Winfrey as part of a neoliberal ideological structure that rewrites systemic forms of inequality and exclusion as individual challenges, a range of critics more sympathetic to her advocacy of reading insist that her Book Club, in both its broadcast and online manifestations, constitutes an important forum for the mass circulation of literary discussion that, partly because of Winfrey's own biography, opens up onto issues around racial difference and social justice.³ As Ted Striphas puts it, at stake here 'is the relationship between printed books and television, not to mention a series of normative assumptions underlying each medium's presumed moral worth' (112). Winfrey's advocacy of Toni Morrison is a case in point. Of course, from the perspective of the academy or of specialist critics, Morrison needed no advocacy. She won the Nobel Prize three years before her first appearance on *Oprah*, and novels like *Beloved* had already anchored sophisticated discussions about the relationship between literature, history and contemporary political consciousness. But there is no doubt that Morrison's relationship with Winfrey helped her work circulate to a different, and much larger readership. And if we believe that literary texts like Morrison's are important to broader discussions of the relationship between aesthetics and politics then the question of circulation is clearly a topical one. This is one of the points Simon Stow makes in what is perhaps the most polemical statement of the

³ See Peck, *The Age of Oprah: Cultural Icon for the Neoliberal Era* and Aschoff, *The New Prophets of Capital*. Cecilia Konchar Farr's *Reading Oprah: How Oprah's Book Club Changed the Way America Reads* is probably the clearest academic defense of Winfrey.

political significance of Oprah's Book Club. Stow draws on a range of academic theorists—Martha Nussbaum, Richard Rorty and Gayatri Spivak—to suggest the 'power of literature and reading' in generating 'useful moral and political insights'. Nussbaum's *Poetic Justice: the Literary Imagination and Public Life*, for instance, argues that, as Stow puts it, 'reading novels about those from whom we differ' expands our 'moral imaginations as citizens, jurors, judges, and social scientists'. And as we become 'more sensitive to the needs of others', we also become 'better citizens of a liberal democratic society' (278, 280).⁴ Stow's real point though is that this process of moral-imaginative expansion is not simply a result of the books themselves; it emerges through discussions of them in which participants get to express and then work through their responses. This, he argues, is what Oprah's Book Club does on a mass scale. Of course there is a lot that might qualify this. Winfrey's audience is predominantly white. As Kimberly Chabot Davis argues, postings on the Book Club web discussion forum indicate that participants tend to personalise specific forms of injustice in ways that obviate the specificity of the issues someone like Morrison is trying to foreground (149). Stow's rejoinder would be that this sort of reading practice is simply part of the dialogical process involved in imaginative expansion, and in fact Davis also shows that online posts around these issues can be very articulate and sophisticated on issues like race-blindness and the colonising effects of empathy (151).

What we are confronting here is really the strong claim for the progressive dimension of middlebrow media. Oprah's Book Club organises the incorporation of literary texts into media forms driven by fairly ruthless commercial logics. As in the original Book-of-the-Month Club, participants are reliant on the evaluative decisions of an intermediary, while the economy of this process is supported, if not encouraged, by publishers who can expect selected titles to quickly and exponentially increase their sales. And yet it is through these commercial processes that a kind of democratic education might well be taking place. If there are clear ruptures between Oprah's Book Club and Arnoldian visions of social uplift, they involve primarily differences regarding the extent to which reading is embedded in other media, not any real disagreement about reading itself. The questions around this sort of forum are, I think, genuinely open-ended, in no small part because they might depend on the kind of empirical, sociological research that people in literary studies very seldom do unless they are explicitly dealing with histories of reception. Is it possible, in lieu of that research, to track the process of imaginative expansion that Stow attributes to Oprah's Book Club, or to link it to other constituencies that might have a discernible social or even electoral impact? Or is something like Lauren Berlant's sense of the 'juxtapolitical'—public

⁴ Timothy Aubry, in *Reading as Therapy*, also talks about Winfrey's Book Club as an example of 'the capacity of middlebrow forms of identification to mediate encounters across racial and cultural boundaries' (14).

fora capable of clarifying or consolidating experiences that aren't represented by the political per se—the effective limit of how these readerships encounter the political realm?⁵

One of the models I keep returning to in regard to these questions is John Hartley's bracing account of the postmodern public sphere. Quickly displacing the myth of the classical public sphere linked to print culture and enlightened opinion formation, Hartley instead stresses the role of popular media (television in particular) in the shaping of identities, attitudes and affects; in 'producing and distributing knowledge, visualizing and teaching public issues in the midst of private consumption, writing the truths of our time on the bodies of those image-saturated "celebrities" whose cultural function is to embody, circulate, dramatize and teach certain public virtues within a suburban cultural context' (181). In this model modest, even minimal political truisms circulate widely and effectively, but something like a critique of underlying relations of production seems virtually impossible, not least because the structures of the media forms at stake are so deeply dependent on them. At the same time, the opposition that we saw in Radway's work, between the myth of immediacy and the materiality of middlebrow media, makes it hard to imagine alternative ways of incorporating literary texts, other than those associated with high school and university classrooms, or with 'expert' reading practices that have a very limited public circulation. Understanding how more specialised, or specifically identified readerships might constitute counterpublics or constituencies that differentiate themselves from the idea of niche markets would qualify this significantly. In general though, the more ubiquitous our notion of a popular readership is, the more its 'democratic' promise invites us to settle for what one suspects are the circumscribed political gains of hegemonic media environments. Radway's earlier research on readers of popular romance, for instance, wants to explore reading as an active, potentially resistant form of everyday practice. It ends up with the fairly tame idea of 'compensatory' reading that is compulsively private. In fact, what Radway posits as 'oppositional and contestative' (*Reading Romance*, 211-13) looks suspiciously close to Herbert Marcuse's account of an 'affirmative culture' that imagines an 'eternally better and more valuable world' opposed to the 'factual world of the daily struggle for existence', yet without any ability to 'transform the state of fact' (95). When Striplhas summarises the effect of Oprah's Book Club, it is this sort of compensatory or affirmative practice that he more or less evokes: 'the club demonstrates how women can carve out a safe harbor of sorts for themselves, one adjacent to but ultimately distinct from everyday life's repetitive routines'

⁵ Berlant's notion of the 'juxtapolitical' refers to a 'critical intelligence' that is 'not usually expressed in or addressed to the political register', because the 'political is deemed an elsewhere managed by elites who are interested in reproducing the conditions of their objective superiority, not in the well-being of ordinary people or life-worlds' (2-3).

(128). As Timothy Aubry's related work on 'therapeutic reading' acknowledges, we can only really talk about opposition here in a qualified sense: the 'conceptual horizon' of middlebrow reading isn't 'subversive or radical vis-à-vis capitalism', though it is 'more flexible, more capable of accommodating critical, sophisticated modes of thought, and more open to communal aspirations than the left generally acknowledges' (12). The sense of treading water here is fairly clear: critics of mass media and popular forms of culture consumption consistently undervalue their complexity, and yet that complexity does little to change the status quo or to trouble the conflation of progressive politics with market forces. None of this should prompt a return to outmoded notions of aesthetic autonomy or to a valorisation of cultural forms merely because they seem to resist commercialisation. But I do think we can imagine and construct different structures that might generate different kinds of critical practice that are just as materially dense as those discussed under the rubric of the new literary middlebrow.

The recent work of the novelist, architect and design theorist Friedrich von Borries interests me in this respect because it insists on rearticulating the critique of mass media implicit in postulations of aesthetic autonomy within a form of cultural production entirely synonymous with the media concept. Of course this means that it has to reject the idea of autonomy, and ultimately perhaps the idea of the literary as a discrete field of practice, in order to transfer the ethos of critique associated with what Guillory calls the 'cultural disciplines' into the 'system of the media' (360), which in turn becomes the basis of a renewed conception of critical and creative activity. This is an important rejoinder to dominant forms of middlebrow media which invite us to mistake serialised relationships to mediating agencies for a community of readers or a kind of counterpublic.⁶ In contrast, von Borries' project insists that writers, artists and critics have the ability to form and reform the media in which they are embedded, and to do so in a way that troubles existing constituencies, while holding out the possibility of creating new ones. His work draws on the legacy of the Frankfurt School, though it does so not simply by refusing the culture industry, but by ironically embracing and manipulating it in order to expose its logic. The migration of critical theory into technological media is not especially new. In the 1960s Alexander Kluge's development of an experimental cinema in opposition to prevailing forms of commercial entertainment explicitly evoked the Frankfurt School critique of the culture industry as its point of reference. Later, Kluge's work in television would incorporate avant-garde elements to form a fairly clear juxtaposition to the commercial broadcasting environment in which it appeared. Friedrich von Borries is quite different, but I think he belongs to this broader

⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre evokes the notion of seriality in relationship to the queue as a figure for an atomised kind of collectivity informed by the 'massification of the social ensemble' (256-65).

trajectory. His recent work constructs an interplay between mainstream literary publishing, marketing, social networking, and gaming, in the interests of an activism pitted against the commercial forms he appropriates. In the process literary texts are no longer available as objects of philological fascination or middle-class recreation. On the contrary, they emerge as constituents of larger networks, just as they do in middlebrow formations. The difference is that von Borries' project grasps media as the material of artistic practice and the object of intervention, rather than simply the basis of a commercial/industrial apparatus that circulates objects existing prior to it.⁷ In this respect it remains true to the idea of the historical avant-garde which, contrary to what we might glean from scholarship on the middlebrow, had no interest in preserving the autonomy of the aesthetic. On the contrary, it sought, as Peter Bürger has argued, 'the sublation of art in the praxis of life' (51). Von Borries' work embodies, we might say, the sublation of literature into the media concept.

So how does this work? Von Borries' novel *Das richtige Leben im falschen*, published by Suhrkamp in 2013, integrates Adorno's critical theory into the space of popular fiction, but then appears to integrate the book's plot and its thematic components into a much broader media environment that essentially asks readers to transfer their reading experience into various forms of virtual activity (social networking, online shopping, and online gaming) that can organise the formation of constituencies apparently discernible in real time and space. The title of the novel inverts a famous line from Adorno's *Minima Moralia*. Discussing the bad conscience of the subject subsumed by property relations, Adorno concludes that 'Wrong life cannot be lived rightly': '*Es gibt kein richtiges Leben im falschen*' (39). In other words, there is no real ameliorative possibility within relations of production as they currently exist. Hence the democratic optimism associated with the popular is always qualified, if not subverted, by its deep complicity with capitalism's regressive tendencies: the bourgeois' 'love of people as they are', Adorno writes, 'stems from his hatred of what they might be' (25). *Das richtige Leben im falschen* is all about inhabiting the space of this populism, in order that the state of things as they are can give way to a sense of what they might become. The importance of von Borries' project consists in the fact that this sense of transformation isn't simply imagined or symbolic. It hinges on the creation of a media network that enacts the poverty of consumer capitalism, but that also suggests the potential of the media concept in forming a new sense of how critique can be publicly actualised.

⁷ In this sense it gestures at the kind of radical mediation discussed by Richard Grusin. For Grusin mediation isn't simply a structure existing between a given subject and object, but the 'process, action, or event that generates or provides the conditions for the emergence of subjects and objects, for the individuation of entities within the world' (137-8).

The central motif, the focus, of von Borries' novel is advertising, which he presents as emblematic of culture's social efficacy, and the strongest articulation of how ostensibly progressive cultural practices are incorporated into and/or organised by commercial logics. Perhaps there is a kind of overstatement in this, but if we want to believe that watching *Oprah* can be part of a broader process of consciousness raising, then why would we dismiss the social content of any number of recent advertising campaigns that essentially link commercial brands to progressive social values? And let's remember that Radway herself suggests that the universalising properties of commodification are also inherently democratising, because they model an undoing of restrictive hierarchies. Formally speaking, however, the novel has little relationship to the sort of texts that count as middlebrow. It melds elements of popular fiction with elements reminiscent of the avant-garde. The opening pages could belong to an airport thriller: we have a suicide, or perhaps a murder, and an iPhone that enables a framing narrator to reconstruct the story of the deceased, who, we soon learn, was a creative director at a Hamburg advertising agency and was obsessed with turning global protest movements like Occupy Wall Street into a lifestyle brand called RLF, *das richtige Leben im falschen* (the title of the novel, and perhaps an ironic echo of the RAF, the *Rote Armee Fraktion*). The prose is simple and unadorned; the characters are flat and fairly clichéd. Action and plot-driving dialogue are quickly overrun by the novel's thematic preoccupations. Pitching a campaign for a new style of runner called 'the Urban Force', for instance, Jan, the central character, shows images of Che Guevara as an example of a global brand that commodifies dissent: 'There's no contradiction between capitalism and revolution', he insists. 'Quite the contrary: capitalism is permanent revolution' (31). This isn't great literature. It's not exactly recreational reading either. And if the initial postulation of the capitalist incorporation of radical motifs feels tired, things soon begin to change. As the novel unfolds the lifestyle brand becomes more important than the characters who invent it. It is also clear that the advertising agency behind it all might not quite be in control of the project. We suspect that the artists and activists Jan recruits are also coopting the scheme and using the techniques of advanced capitalism (advertising, branding, the culture industry etc.) as a way of actualising a counterpublic hidden inside a public of passive consumers. The novel signals this possibility partly through its own digressions into the space of critical theory. The plot is constantly being interrupted, and clarified, by wiki-type entries that bring advertising culture, high-tech consumerism, and critique into proximity and dialogue: Edward Bernays (Freud's nephew and the inventor of modern public relations), Jeff Koons, Zygmunt Bauman, Michel de Certeau, Theodor Adorno, Pierre Bourdieu, Guy Debord, Andreas Baader, the Invisible Committee and many others are glossed in this context. So are a range of objects (the iPhone, the Blackberry), concepts (dazzle camouflage, capitalist realism) and events or movements (Occupy Wall Street). The novel also includes the transcripts of fairly involved interviews with people who represent various positions along the

unlikely arc connecting theory and fashion: among them Oliviero Toscani (the man behind the United Colors of Benetton campaign), Kalle Lasn (the founder of Adbusters and a leading figure in the Occupy movement), and Judith Butler (herself a winner of the Adorno prize). These figures are asked to comment on Adorno's dictum: '*es gibt kein richtiges Leben im falschen*', and to speculate on the possibility of using capitalism's media and marketing networks for revolutionary ends. To say that much of the novel is about giving the reader a sort of socio-critical orientation that is rare in commercial fiction is stating the obvious. It reads like a crash course in critical theory, and in this respect echoes von Borries' work as a cultural critic, which has charted the insidious ways in which Nike has colonised the fallow spaces of Berlin (old U-Bahn stations, ruins, vacant lots etc.) to rebrand the city at the most molecular level (see *Wer hat Angst vor Niketown*).

The central question posed by the interviews, of which there are eleven in all, involves the tension between autonomy and incorporation that, albeit with a different emphasis, informs the work on the middlebrow I have just glossed. The postulation of autonomy might be an idealistic fiction, but does that mean that critique's incorporation into technological media has to surrender the notion of non-identity (non-identity with the instrumentalising processes of capitalism) that underpins this idealism? The interviews circle around this question, and even people like Oliviero Toscani are instructive in the realism with which they embrace the relationship between power and media (45). At the same time, Toscani's sense that one must work through hegemonic systems in order to be effective is questioned by a range of positions insisting that 'capitalism is not identical with society', even though, as Harald Walzer says, its 'mechanisms, forms of communication and modes of actualisation are largely responsible for a general diminishing of freedom' (62). But if advertising influences public opinion, why can't consumerism also be a motor for social transformation? As Jan muses, apparently breathing in the atmosphere of these debates, 'Revolution and advertising. Advertising as a motor for social change. To change capitalism from the inside out. To use advertising and its powers of seduction to arrive at a new conception of society' (80). 'Adorno would be turning in his grave if he knew you were abusing him in the interests of lifestyle marketing', Jan's collaborator Slavia tells him a bit later: 'It's a pure distortion' (126-7).

Of course there is a sort of intractability about how these issues are presented: an intractability that I'd argue is specific to the anchoring of critical theory in the medium of print. It persists until we realise, fairly late on, that the material integration of the novel into a much broader media environment is being presented as a way beyond a circular kind of theoretical speculation. The sort of socio-critical orientation that emerges from the book's content—that is, critique restricted to the medium of print—is useful, especially for readers perhaps coming at these issues for the first time, but it isn't really what is at stake. *Das richtige Leben*

im falschen opens almost as piece of genre fiction, it proceeds as a montage combining fiction with documentary elements and a parallel theoretical commentary, and concludes with the realisation that the novel's account of RLF's development merely lays the groundwork for its actualisation beyond the limits of the text. The framing narrator has been asked to write the story we've been reading so that we understand the conceptual underpinnings of what turns out to be a much more expansive multimedia project, for which the novel has functioned as one possible gateway. As the Suhrkamp website tells us, RLF is the name of a 'new, revolutionary movement from Berlin', that aims to fight capitalism with its own weapons. It moves between literature, film, art and fashion. It is a transmedial event.⁸ Of course this statement, a blurb really, still occurs in the space of commercial advertising. And it echoes the manifesto-like statements that draw on the juxtaposed interviews and appear in the course of the novel as part of the RLF pitch. But in the novel itself, the RLF url appears not as a coda or as part of a marketing apparatus external to the text, but as one of its concluding montage elements. If we haven't already figured out that the design of the novel itself conforms to RLF's distinctive branding—black, white and gold trim—as it is described in the plot of the novel, the website makes it all perfectly clear.

At the RLF website (rlf-propaganda.com) we find the vacuous lifestyle consumerism imagined in the novel. When the site was still live (it isn't now) one could apparently order the commodities we see designed in the course of the text. The site also includes a series of manifestos, a rewards system for budding activists that essentially gamifies politicisation, and the record of the actual meetings of the people who have become RLF shareholders, which presumably means buying branded commodities to fund the political collective they now belong to. It is hard not to do a double take. The sense of irony here is clear, and yet the idea of a work of fiction spilling over into a media environment that motivates a diverse range of actions, protest among them, also contains something liberating vis-à-vis conventional forms of culture consumption. Of course much of what appears here is also fiction, as an accompanying mockumentary makes clear, and anyone entering into the spirit of the website would see that the melding of critique and consumerism is being presented as a reflection of how we are interpellated by the processes of late capitalism. But at the same time the project is grounded in a use of diverse media forms that is itself suggestive of the possibilities for counter-hegemonic constituencies inherent in a decentralised media environment. Incredulity here is a fairly natural response, and one that is powerfully symptomatic of our position in relationship to middlebrow media. In one of the novel's interviews Hakim Bey tellingly quotes Fredric Jameson: 'it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism'

⁸ 'RLF von Friedrich von Borries.' suhrkamp.de/rlf. Suhrkamp/Insel. 8 Jan. 2016.

(149).⁹ The statement indicates the difficulties of imagining the sort of collective entities that might be able to displace hegemonic processes and institutions, which is also the difficulty of conceptualising the ethos of dissent associated with conceptions of aesthetic autonomy in terms of the media concept.

RLF's vision of the relationship between reading, ironic consumerism, gaming and activism is as much the representation of a movement, as a movement per se. The difference between representation and reality is one of things at stake in it: RLF can also stand for 'real life fiction'. What RLF offers most emphatically, however, is a provocation. On the one hand it demystifies the confluence of progressive politics and market technologies. On the other hand it suggests that mediatisation is the material basis of both critique and mobilisation. In this respect it is an important rejoinder to the opposition between fictions of autonomy and the reality of hegemonic forms of mediatisation that commentary on the middlebrow, both critical and cautiously celebratory, has bequeathed us. Once we put aside the illusion that discernment grounded in autonomy is the only alternative to the culture industry (and vice versa), or that a certain kind of critical ethos remains inherently antithetical to technological media, we can also grasp mediatisation itself as an object of critical and creative practice, and as an invitation to experiment with the relationship between critique and its public actualisation. Whatever we think about the political valences of dominant forms of literary media—from Oprah's Book Club to the pages of the *New Yorker*—there is no need to accept them as the basis on which we try to imagine an ameliorative cultural politics. In the age of the digital, with its massive capacity for decentralisation, this model of hegemonic cultural production, with its mediating authorities and its sense of consumption as compensation for alienation, should be as anachronistic as the fantasies of autonomy so often pitted against it. Indeed, what is probably most emphatically 'new' about the new literary middlebrow are technologies that anticipate a thoroughgoing refusal of the authority structures that are still taken for granted in even the most optimistic scholarship on popular reading.

ANDREW MCCANN is a Professor of English at Dartmouth College. His most recent publications are *Christos Tsiolkas and the Fiction of Critique: Politics, Obscenity, Celebrity* (2015), and *Popular Literature, Authorship and the Occult in Late Victorian Britain* (2014). He is currently writing a book about Klaus Kinski.

⁹ The original source of the quotation is Fredric Jameson's 2003 essay 'Future City' (76).

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