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Mapping The Contemporary American Public Sphere With Habermas, Deleuze, And Soderbergh

Hunter Main

William & Mary - Arts & Sciences, hmain11@gmail.com

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Mapping the Contemporary American Public Sphere With Habermas, Deleuze, and
Soderbergh

Hunter Main

Titusville, New Jersey

Bachelor of Arts, Georgetown University, 2016

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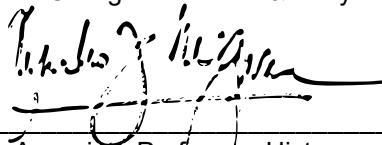
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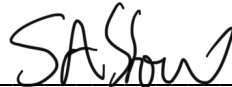


Committee Chair

Elizabeth Losh, Professor, English and American Studies
College of William & Mary



Charles McGovern, Associate Professor, History and American Studies
College of William & Mary



Simon Stow, Professor, Government and American Studies
College of William & Mary

ABSTRACT

However infirm “the public” may be as a political body in America today, its presence as idea in American life is still potent. This thesis seeks to take a first step in developing an idea of what a contemporary American public looks like and how it functions, using concepts developed by Jürgen Habermas, Chantal Mouffe, and Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari.

The Habermasian “public sphere” is a major reference point for popular thinking about the public, and *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* is indeed an exemplary historical and critical account of the wide range of forces that cohered in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to form the liberal bourgeois public sphere, whose remnants exist in the constitutional governments of today. Yet later thinkers have critiqued Habermas’ account of its transformation into a contemporary public sphere as containing a normativity that idealizes the bourgeois character of the original public sphere. This thesis uses the public presented by the 2022 American film *Kimi*, directed by Stephen Soderbergh, to highlight the ways the public sphere has difficulty accounting for the specific undemocratic forces—which deter the type of rational communication the public sphere needs to function—that are most prevalent today.

The thesis then spotlights an especially prevalent explanation for the sphere’s normative idealism—that the public sphere’s bourgeois class function facilitates a unity of opinion at its center, which is then explained by the collective exercise of innate human rationality—and the alternative conception of a public that most explicitly factors this critique into its structure: the agonist public, or one in which disagreement among participants is built into political proceedings. Although agonism is perceptive in diagnosing the problems posed by the public sphere’s idealism, its argument that the sphere’s necessary unity is the cause of this idealism (which can therefore be excised it by facilitating disagreement through the concept of the “adversary”), is less convincing—much more potent are the claims that the structure of “the public” as an idea requires some sort of normativity to exist.

A more fruitful comparison between the public sphere and the agonist sphere can be done by mediating their relationship through the lens of the fascicular. This notion, formulated by Deleuze & Guattari, describes the tendency to maintain a fundamental unity even as it splits and forms new connections in seemingly rhizomatic ways. The arboreal characteristics of liberalism are well described in *Structural Transformation* and are thus built into the object of the public sphere (and account for much of the previously described critiques); because the “root” of the agonist sphere is in these same characteristics, they cannot be overcome to achieve the sort of democratic goals agonism intends to foster even as it explicitly addresses them. The nature of fascicular tendencies can be more clearly seen in *Kimi*, where the fascicular weakness of screen-based communication allows Soderbergh to continue his career-long tendency to comment on the norms of Hollywood cinema and the medium of film itself.

The conclusion of this thesis suggests a shared goal of the seemingly incongruous Habermas and Deleuze & Guattari, “to escape the abstract opposition between the multiple and the one,” and identifies areas where a further partnership between these two sets of thinkers about the public can proceed.

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To Carol and Geobel.

The persistence of the “public sphere”

What do we think about when we think about “the public” in America today? Does anything appear at all? Has “the vanquishing of *homo politicus* by contemporary neoliberal rationality” (Brown 99) turned us all into divisible, disposable *homo oeconomicus*, “an intensely constructed and governed bit of human capital” constructed to cohere only in the name of “rational” market-driven ideals to the detriment of any other way of living (10)? Have we acceded the responsibility of our publicness to public opinion, “in many respects [...] the primary form of representation in contemporary societies” (Hardt and Negri 258) and something designed only to exist in *discourse* rather than actually actionable fields (Bourdieu 128-129)? Does modern communication technology open up new forms of “socially mediated publics” in which the relationship between an audience and a public is increasingly complicated by “multi-layered audiences, individual attributes” and the requirement to work through a variety of systems and contexts all at once (Baym and boyd 328)—not to mention structured by the “Internet prosumer commodification, the unpaid labour of Internet users, targeted advertising, and economic surveillance” upon which corporate social media is based (Fuchs 255)? Regardless of what notion is most accurate, they all underline a common anxiety: the contemporary American public is not a viable political body.

Yet despite its lack of vitality, the public still feels like a thing that exists—that *must* exist—in American life. It is present in the way Americans think about themselves in relation to others and to their government; as Lauren Berlant argues, even if there is no sense of “a common public culture,” there is still a “privatized, intimate core of national culture” built on participation in personal acts whose similarity works as a “condition of social membership”—although this is a public made up only of individualized actions, it is a public nonetheless (3, 5). The sense of a “public sphere,” in particular, continues to

shape the specific idea of what a public is in American life. The term, first conceived by Jürgen Habermas in 1962's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, describes the social body that appeared during the liberal bourgeois era of the late-seventeenth century of "private individuals assembled into a public body" to "confer in an unrestricted fashion—that is, with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and public their opinion—about matters of general interest" ("The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article" 116, 114). Through the exposure to other members' public use of reason via rational-critical debate, these matters of general interest would become transformed into "the general interest" writ large. Why this sense of a public still exists today (albeit in a structurally transformed state) is because the outgrowths of liberal bourgeois society formed by the public sphere—liberal constitutional government, the concept of a public use of reason, and other historically specific concepts that have not always existed—still endure today.

Our temporal distance from the public sphere's original state, however, has degraded its meaning from a specific social construction to something so definitionally loose that it brings the usefulness of the term at all into question. An example of this transformation can be found in the *New York Times*, where five 2015 news articles that contain the term each use it in a different way. One piece, from May of that year, used it as a synonym for "public record," contrasting biographical details gleaned from the Twitter account of the perpetrator of a Texas shooting with details later posted by suspected ISIS combatants that were "not yet in the public sphere" (Callimachi).¹ Another, from June, used it to refer to the area where work is done by "public figures," in this case that of former IMF head Dominique Strauss-Kahn, and posited it as a direct

¹ "Some of these fighters later posted on Twitter details of Mr. Simpson's biography not yet in the *public sphere*, suggesting that he had shared details about his life with them" (emphasis added).

contrast to his “private life” (Breedon and Rubin).² A piece of news analysis, also from June, has “public sphere” refer to a part of the general intellect that consists of the important and well-known, where both President Obama and fictional characters like *Scandal*'s Olivia Pope are represented (Polgreen).³ The definition found in a fourth piece, a September article on a \$50 million campaign to reform high schools, is a combination of the previous two: by saying campaign founder Laurene Powell Jobs “has taken tentative steps into the public sphere” when “advocating an overhaul of immigration laws,” the article links the public sphere to both governmental/political work (as Strauss-Kahn did as IMF chair) and to action done in the public eye (Medina).⁴ (This vocal advocacy is contrasted with Jobs' prior, quieter association with the organization College Track, a group aimed at increasing college enrollment by low-income students, which she merely “financed.”) Finally, a piece from December used it as shorthand for the realm of citizenship that stems from participation in representative government, calling the recent election of women to local councils in Saudi Arabia, the first in which women were able to participate, “a step into the public sphere, but a limited one” (Hubbard).⁵

These discrepancies open up a number of questions. Is the public sphere something one is inherently part of (like the Texas shooter), or is it something one needs to actively join (like Strauss-Kahn when he entered government)? Are only the well-known, like

² “Although there was considerable interest in Mr. Strauss-Kahn’s private life, it did not translate into condemnation of his abilities to work in *the public sphere*, even though many felt he had crossed a line beyond other politicians’ escapades” (emphasis added). Note the comparison with “other politicians” that turns this “public sphere” into more than just the opposite of “private life.”

³ “Never in its history have black people been more fully represented in the *public sphere*. The United States has a black president and a glamorous first lady who is a descendant of slaves. African Americans lead the country’s pop culture in many ways, from sports to music to television, where show-runners like Shonda Rhimes and Lee Daniels have created new black icons, including the political fixer Olivia Pope on ‘*Scandal*’ and the music mogul Cookie Lyon on ‘*Empire*’” (emphasis added).

⁴ “Ms. Powell Jobs has for years financed College Track, which helps low-income students across the country to enroll and then succeed in college. Since the death of her husband in 2011, Ms. Powell Jobs has taken tentative steps into the *public sphere*, including advocating an overhaul of immigration laws” (emphasis added). The subheading of the article also contains the term (“Laurene Powell Jobs is venturing deeper into the *public sphere*”), which reiterates the spatial element (“steps”) also found in the main text (emphasis added).

⁵ Quoted material is full text of subheading.

Olivia Pope, part of the public sphere, or are the women of Saudi Arabia, unknown in name and profession to the general public, part of it, too? Was Jobs only a member of the public sphere when she began actively speaking out about political issues, or did she become a participant earlier, when she began dealing with “public” issues like college enrollment rates as part of an organization?

That these questions and others are raised at all is not the *Times*' fault. Today, “public sphere” is an empty phrase whose meaning is not just informed, but determined, by its specific context, closer to having no definition than having any. Despite lacking true meaning, however, in none of the five articles does “public sphere” seem like the wrong turn of phrase; as long as the referent involves some sort of defined collection of people and their “publicness,” “public sphere” makes sense to the reader. This may be due in part to the aforementioned outgrowths of bourgeois society: the distancing effect of time and change has made the details blurry, but their presence is still rooted in prevailing structures.

Yet the mere presence of the public sphere in the structures in the bedrock of American society is not enough to explain why it remains in the public consciousness—plenty of once-constitutive elements of social and economic structures have fallen by the wayside. A more convincing rationale can be found in what some argue is the public sphere's explicitly *ideological* bent. The major critique of Habermas' account of the public sphere by historians and other academics has been found to be its normative idealism, which stems from the specific social structure of the liberal bourgeois public sphere, or that Habermas presents the sphere as an ideal type rather than a purely historical formation. This is a problem because although *Structural Transformation* positions the proper functioning of the public sphere as a possible bulwark against

“domination and power” as a whole,⁶ specific qualities of the liberal bourgeois public sphere are quite undemocratic. For all of the public sphere’s self-proclaimed universalism and openness, its participants in practice were only by those who took part in the market economy as owners of capital, meaning that the “general interest” it was constructed to speak for cohered with the interests of this class. As time passed, the number of groups allowed to participate in the sphere increased to include those without property, women, and minorities. This increase corresponded with the changes to social and economic structures that also accumulated, such as universal suffrage. A given era’s public sphere thus became more and more distanced from the historical conditions that originally formed it in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, even if its normative structures (built out of these outmoded historical conditions) remained. As much as this increase in democratic participation is an unambiguous good, it also eliminates the “unifying general interest” (i.e. the maintenance of the bourgeois property regime) that allows the “rational-critical debate” at the heart of the public sphere to function as an effective political tool (Calhoun 30). The closer to true universalism a society becomes, the farther it gets from the bourgeois class interest that unified and powered it during the liberal era. Far from being a critique leveled only by vulgar Marxists, Habermas himself argues this point in *Structural Transformation*.⁷ There therefore exists a tension within contemporary application of the public sphere: without an institutional basis for a public sphere that contains the rational-critical debate Habermas sees as a requisite for democratic participation, it is difficult to avoid some sort of invocation (however undesired) of the unequal structures of the liberal bourgeois era that birthed it. Can we use the public

⁶ *Structural Transformation* final sentence: “In the case of the structural transformation of the bourgeois public sphere, we can study the extent to which, and manner in which, the latter’s ability to assume *its* proper function determines whether the exercise of domination and power persists as a negative concept, as it were, of history—or whether as a historical category itself, it is open to substantive change” (250, emphasis in text).

⁷ “*The fully developed bourgeois public sphere was based on the fictitious identity of the two roles assumed by the privatized individuals who came together to form a public: the role of property owners and the role of human beings pure and simple*” (56, emphasis in text).

sphere in the historical/critical sense as Habermas intends without becoming entrapped in the normativity that renders it historically irrelevant at best and actively undemocratic at worst?

This thesis is split up into two main parts. The first seeks to explain the Habermasian public sphere, its uses, and its critiques, especially concerning its normative idealism. The second part begins by exploring the critique of the public sphere by agonist thinkers like Chantal Mouffe, which finds the sphere's unity of outcome—the unified “public opinion” achieved via rational debate—to be its main source of normativity. The agonist alternative is to foster a system in which different opinions among democratic participants can be held, eschewing the Enlightenment-era notions of rationality and replacing them with a shared commitment to democratic ideals among participants that allow for disagreement. Because of the liberal structure in which the ideals of the agonist sphere are exercised, however, its particular critique cannot address the public sphere's normativity on its own. To help clarify the agonist critique, the thesis will then introduce the notion of the fascicular devised by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. This concept, which builds on their central notion of the rhizome, describes a tendency of an object that loses its unifying element to build secondary unities (thus continuing the totality of the original) instead of connecting to new objects in a rhizomatic fashion.⁸ This recontextualizes certain elements of both the public sphere and its agonist critique to take a first step at better understanding their normative elements and make them better suited at looking at the public in contemporary America.

⁸ Deleuze and Guattari liken the fascicular to a tree where the original root is destroyed but “an immediate, indefinite multiplicity of secondary roots graft” onto the original system instead of creating and connecting to something new, à la a fungal system (5).

Both of these sections will incorporate readings of the 2022 film *Kimi* to contextualize certain arguments. In the first, the inadequacy of the public sphere to describe contemporary American society is thrown into sharp relief by the themes of the film, which portray realities such as surveillance technology and public health emergencies in ways that highlight how even a structurally transformed public sphere is not able to contain their contours. In the second, the use of screen-based technology in the film provides an example of how identifying a fascicular element of a concept, or a characteristic that splits off from the whole of an object to make new connections but cannot escape the subjective elements that define that object, can add resonance to our understanding of the forces that form the concept of the public sphere—and in doing so, getting closer to finding its place in contemporary America. As media makes up an increasingly constitutive part of the country's present-day public sphere, whether it be as a participatory tool (Carpentier) or observed object (Adut, 50), studying film can serve as a valuable way of identifying specifically American constructions of the public.

The conclusion of the thesis touches on one similarity between the seemingly incongruous pairing of Habermas and Deleuze & Guattari: they both seek to eliminate the abstract opposition between the one and the multiple. This opposition views the individual and the collective as two poles of a single idea—the one as the fragmented multiple, the multiple as a collection of ones. Getting rid of this idea means fostering a sense of the many that is not indebted to the idea of a mass of divisible people; similarly, it does not treat the subjectivity of an individual as a wholly independent operation that is changed from an ideal type when put into a crowd setting. This project is at the heart of Deleuze & Guattari's idea of the multiplicity, but it is also found in the way Habermas talks about the subjectivity of the public sphere, and could serve as a next step in reconciling the work of these two very different sets of thinkers.

If we are to use the public sphere as Habermas imagines it, as “an analytical tool for ordering certain phenomenon and placing them in a particular context as part of a categorical frame,” it is vital to understand its deficiencies and limits (“Further Reflections on the Public Sphere” 462). The work of Deleuze & Guattari is able to provide an alternative to this teleological perspective, in which a tool’s components (for example, the growth of rational-critical debate) are fixated towards and given meaning by a single goal (the idealization of the liberal bourgeois public sphere) rather than an open-endedness that constantly searches for novel functions and connections.⁹ As much as I would like to imagine otherwise, their alternative implies that Habermas’ impressive historical grounding of the public sphere cannot be separated from its normative basis—it is built into it. But the mere existence of idealism within a concept cannot be a kiss of death, not when the notion is built into the political structures and social subjectivity we still live in today but has lost any actual meaning. The purpose of this thesis is to identify the normative elements of the public sphere, then use the ideas of Deleuze & Guattari to ensure they are properly accounted for in further use of the concept.

The Habermasian public sphere and its critics

The Habermasian public sphere was first surveyed in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, published in Germany in 1962. In it, Habermas writes an account of the formation of a historically specific public (the “liberal bourgeois” model, which will be referred to as simply “the public sphere” for the remainder of the section) in late-seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Western Europe, then outlines its disintegration into the “social welfare-state” model as the relationship between the state and the public changed in the nineteenth and twentieth century. Habermas calls the public sphere a

⁹ Fighting against the rigidity of the functions that make up a tool’s components is the basis of another popular Deleuzian ideal, the body without organs (*A Thousand Plateaus* 149-166).

“realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed” (“The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article” 114). In this model, public opinion was no longer the simple amalgamation of various individual opinions but a unified opinion that, being built by rational-critical public debate, was thought to be reasonable and was given political valence as a result (*Structural Transformation* Chapter 12).

Before proceeding any further, it is helpful to think of the public sphere as the result of certain societal forces rather than as a given component of any democratic society. Public opinion in this specific sort of public sphere concerned itself with the newly emerging modern state, with which it was constructed to oppose. The medieval public was a “*publicness (or publicity) of representation*” where a sovereign ruler “represented” the state through his presence (*Structural Transformation* 7, emphasis in text). This sense of public does not refer to a collection of people; Habermas likens it to “something like a status attribute” that defined the difference of a lord from his subjects (7). As there were no claims to a public through a rational system of laws or anything else that existed beyond the personal exercise of monarchical will, a collection of people was not a public, just a set of subjects. Yet this does not mean these subjects were automatically assembled in a *private* sphere. The “economic organization of social labor” characteristic of feudal economies, in which lordly domination defined European society, meant there were no realm in which the classical sense of *privatus* could be enacted (5).¹⁰

The emerging capitalist political economy began to form a differently oriented society, one that included a class that was neither subject to manorial power for survival nor a part of it. The growth of a market economy “broke the fetters of domination based on landed estate and necessitated forms of administration invested with state authority”—a

¹⁰ “Status in the [public] *polis* was...based upon status as the unlimited master of an [private, household] *oikos*” in ancient Greece, but in feudal Europe, “there was no status that in terms of *private law* defined in some fashion the capacity in which private people could step forward into a public sphere” (*Structural Transformation* 3, 5, emphasis added).

completely different role for governing power (141). From this change a real distinction between public and private emerged. Within the eighteenth-century private sphere was “the realm of commodity exchange and social labor,” or civil society, as well as the household (30). Habermas wisely partners Joseph Schumpeter’s claim that the breakdown of feudal economy/power turned “each family’s individual economy [into] the center of its existence” with the corollary that this individual economy had to be directed outward towards the commodity market—that is, it could not be oriented towards a wholly private sphere (19). The critical liberal bourgeois public arose from a new relationship with an idea of “the public” that now had two disparate definitions. The bourgeois public opposed “the public” in its authoritative, representational form by asserting the separation of the private from it, as it now needed a governing structure that facilitated their actions in the market via administration rather than domination. It joined “the public” in its collective form by “transcending the confines of private domestic authority and becoming a subject of public interest” by participating in the market (24).

The public sphere arose from this changing relationship with economic forces but was incubated through two main institutions: the reconstitution of the family and the world of letters. In the family, a paradox began to form. The new conception of the “public” of the market changed the domestic sphere into the public’s theoretical opposite, the “private”. “In truth,” says Habermas, “it was profoundly caught up in the requirements of the market,” not opposed to it but working as two parts of the same structure of “the people” entering the realm of the political; for example, the fact that the male head of household now owned the property in which the family lived or earned their money reinforced its patriarchal makeup (55). This incongruity—“ideology” in the classical Marxist sense—had a great effect on the political self-understanding of the bourgeois public, putting “two roles under the common title of the ‘private’” (29).

The letter-writing public reflected “a process of self-clarification of private people focusing on the genuine [and humanist] experiences of their novel privateness” that allowed for both the self-reflection and the audience-oriented subjectivity necessary for the public sphere’s critical basis (29). The literary public sphere of the novel, the art form that stemmed from these changes, led to “the development of institutional bases...from meeting places to journals to webs of social relationships” that made up “the body” of the bourgeois public sphere (Calhoun 12). These institutional bases fostered two differing types of private self-identification, as “property owners” taking part in a market economy and “human beings pure and simple,” to converge and cohere. (56) In doing so, it gave what may appear to be mere personal subjectivity political power.

This change in self-identification was accompanied by *laissez-faire* economic policy and free trade arising in the nineteenth century that allowed the public sphere to “attain its full development in the bourgeois constitutional state” (78-79). The free market presented itself as free from any sort of domination or coercion; thus, a state modeled after the free market would present itself in the same way. Neither the free market nor the bourgeois constitutional state “allowed exceptions for citizens and private persons,” neither able to be manipulated by an individual (as it was in a representing public) nor directed at individuals (as the representing public did to exercise its domination) (80). Public debate was thought “not to achieve compromises or exercise power, but rather to discover laws immanent to its form of society,” or that which sought to replace the notion of power altogether with common-sense rules with which participants could determine by exercising their intrinsic human rationality (16). At this point, the constitutional state subsumed the public sphere into its legislative arm “so as to ensure institutionally the connection between law and public opinion,” public opinion here being thought of as an

exercise of rational agreement (*Structural Transformation*, 81). The executive branch was meant to act as a will acting upon the rational norms organized by the legislative branch.

In summary, the realm of public and private in the Habermasian liberal bourgeois public sphere can be described as emerging from historical conditions. The private realm consists of civil society (the “realm of commodity exchange and social labor”) and the familial realm that facilitated the interiority of the private citizen (30). The sphere of public authority is the realm of the modern state and of the court, which is the remnant of the feudal representative public and consists of nobility. The public sphere exists between these two realms and is made of the political public sphere (that which turned into legislative government in England and elsewhere); the public sphere of letters (from where the political public sphere evolved); and the “town” of coffeehouses, salons and other institutions of cultural production (30). Although it is made of private citizens and is therefore part of the private realm, its concern with public, “common” issues (the subject of the “public opinion” the public sphere generates) separates it from the personal realms of civil society and the family.

Habermas’ account of the early formation and constitution of the liberal bourgeois public sphere ordered innumerable social, political, and economic forces in early modern Western Europe, finding popularity and resonance with scholars from a variety of fields. Mary P. Ryan built upon Habermas’ work on feminist grounds, as it offered an alternative to classical notions of a masculine public and feminine private, calling it “a key text in the search for women in public” that “freed politics from the iron grasp of the state” in a way “suffused with the spirit of openness towards female subjects (261). Joan Landes echoed this claim (6), but she adds that the sphere was also useful in a negative sense. Because the public sphere “rules out all interests that could not or would not lay claim to their own

universality,” scholars can better identify the hidden elements of domination within the liberal bourgeois era by looking at what were deemed “mere opinions (cultural assumptions, normative attitudes, collective prejudices and values)” as a way to highlight that “the body politic produced by the bourgeois revolution was a gendered body” (45, 168). Nancy Fraser’s seminal “Rethinking the Public Sphere” is another example of how a critique of the public sphere has led to important scholarship. Identifying a number of assumptions about the public and democracy in Habermas’ theory, such as “the proliferation of a multiplicity of competing publics is necessarily a step away from, rather than toward, greater democracy” (117), Fraser corresponds them to critiques of contemporary democracy,¹¹ forming “a critical political sociology of a form of public life in which multiple but unequal publics participate” in the process (128).¹² Even if other scholars have criticized Landes’ claim for overstating the way in which the general relationship between men and women changed during the liberal bourgeois era (Zammito 104), the change in ideas of public and private that came about with the public sphere’s formation certainly had an effect on the perceived role of women in society.¹³ Habermas’ work contributed in part to the opening-up of what was considered a public—and worthy of study as a result.

Beyond generative critiques, however, the public sphere has faced its share of criticisms that must be acknowledged and accounted for to ensure its proper use.

¹¹ Habermas’ assumption that multiple publics lead to less democratic outcomes corresponds to Fraser’s interest in how “inequality affects relations among publics in late-capitalist societies, how publics are differently empowered or segmented, and how some are voluntarily enclaved and subordinated to others (137).

¹² Fraser’s critiques have led to their own offshoots, such as Michael Warner’s notion of counterpublics, derived from Fraser’s initial coinage, “subaltern counterpublics” (*Publics and Counterpublics* 118).

¹³ Using the life of French Revolutionary figure Madame Roland as an example, Dorina Outram argues that even if the effect of the eighteenth-century novel (and the literary sphere that allowed it to spread) on the public sphere was perhaps overstated as a “feminization” process, it nevertheless allowed “both sexes [...] a way into the adoption of a political role” (150). In addition, Antoine Lilti compares variants of women-centered realms in pre- and post-revolutionary France, finding that each construction cannot be addressed by classical public/private distinctions. (For example, the post-revolutionary household was a formerly private sphere made public as “the place for the education of the future citizen,” now run through with the political vigor of the revolutionary public sphere but still the domain of the female caregiver in practice (231).)

Over-ordering, wherein elements that don't fit within the sphere's usage pattern are ignored, can explain the lack of the role of religion on Habermas' conception of the public sphere,¹⁴ as well as the sidelining on the plebeian public sphere.¹⁵ The latter criticism is especially damaging not merely because of its historical inadequacy but because, as Negt and Kluge argue, it also undermines the political element of Habermas' project ("Further Reflections" 444).¹⁶ As laudable as Habermas' commitment to democracy is, and as important as this commitment is to his scholarship, it also represents the main critique of the public sphere: that it is presented as an ideal type, whose values can be lived up to or failed, instead of a purely historical object.

The basis of the criticism can be found in the second half of *Structural Transformation*, which moves from a description of the liberal bourgeois public sphere to the sphere's transformation as Western Europe moved out of the liberal bourgeois age. The liberal era's specific forms of public and private, which allowed the public sphere to exist "in between" the two spheres, began to change, and the public sphere changed with it. Instead of the public realm of state and the private realm of the household economy remaining separate, mediated by the public sphere, "private organizations began increasingly to assume public power [... and] the state penetrated the private realm" (Calhoun 21). In the liberal era, "political administration was released from production

¹⁴ David Zaret argues that the growth of Protestantism "legitimated the reasonableness of public opinion as a forum and arbiter for criticism and debate" (226). It is possible that Habermas' "basically negative appraisal of mythical knowledge as the antithesis of rational communication" is a potential reason why he downplays its role in the creation of the public sphere (Salvatore 26).

¹⁵ Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge are at the forefront of this criticism, which they find stems from Habermas' assumption that it is separate from the bourgeois public sphere rather than produced from it (57). This, they argue, allows the public sphere to hold its central contradiction (that it is both an instrument of democracy and a veritable "dictatorship of the bourgeoisie") without collapsing (55).

¹⁶ The plebeian public sphere is limited by the public sphere's relationship of domination over it and must organize itself as a sort of "working-class's defense organization" rather than a political body with its own horizons, limiting it as an incubator for democracy and making it "less capable [...] of holding the line of defense against a fascist mass movement" (61). Fascist movements, historically, have oriented themselves around "the proletarian context of living," and thus present a generative alternative (even if it is "only in the form of mass deception") to the purely *negative*, anti-bourgeois approach the proletarian public sphere is forced to take (61).

tasks” that were now the role of private individuals in the market (*Structural Transformation*, 142). When nineteenth-century neo-mercantilist economic policy arose and when the “the powers of ‘society’ themselves assumed functions of public authority” (i.e., the political influence exercised by the great industrialists of the time), functions of the public bled into the private and private into public (142). In addition, new capacities of the press and changing social conditions broaden the participants of sphere from the coherent bloc of bourgeoisie to more and more people; as a result, the output is no longer coherent, either. Instead of private citizens engaging in public-oriented discussion, the sphere became more concerned with the “compromise of conflicting private interests” (“The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article” 118). The result is a sphere who, instead of constructing public opinion, now creates a “staged display of, and manipulative propaganda of, publicity in the service of persons and institutions, consumer goods, and programs” (*Structural Transformation*, 236). The structures that the public sphere once created (constitutional government, a critical press) now stand as devitalized husks that encourage the worst aspects of the public sphere—their zombified nature threatening the democratic ideals the public sphere had foisted into government in the first place.¹⁷

The inclusion of the structural transformation of the public sphere in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* reframes the first half of the work as something that explores “a strong ideal against which later forms of the public sphere can be set” rather than the historically specific detailing of a historically specific ordering tool (Eley 292). The primary criticism of the Habermasian public sphere is that it insufficiently navigates the distinction between the public sphere being a historical versus a moral ideal type—in

¹⁷ Habermas finds a solution to this husk of a public in the “extension of fundamental rights” practiced by the social welfare states of the era, which encourages the organization of private individuals who could undergo public communication with the welfare state (“The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article” 119). This new relationship between public and private would “take the place of the now-defunct public body of private individuals who relate individually to each other;” in other words, it would reorganize the body behind the idea to better fit the present relationship between public and private (119).

which the present, transformed body has not lived up to, rather than changed from, the ideals in the historic model—a point to which the author himself admits.¹⁸ Other scholars have argued that *Structural Transformation's* primary purpose is finding a way to privilege the rational discussion Habermas views as the cornerstone of a potential radical democracy, with the historical elements of the work subservient to his normative, political interests (Eley 293; Hohendahl 100; Kramer 238). Furthermore, our vantage point of more than sixty years from the original publication of *Structural Transformation* has revealed that Habermas's later work has become more explicitly normative, pointing to an interest in imbuing the communicative democratic ideas of the idealized public sphere with an increased universality using his later theory of communicative action. Calhoun characterized this change as Habermas finding the immanence of democratic ideals in “universal characteristics of human communication” rather than the specific historical conditions of the public sphere, which he now believes relies too heavily on “totalizing Marxist understandings of the relationship between base and superstructure” and of the function of ideology (40). This is the basis of his theory of communicative action, which deems rationality to be a proper ordering force in society via historically guided but ultimately transcendent notions of rationality in all forms of communication. Although it is beyond the scope of this thesis to comment thoughtfully on Habermas' later work (a useful summary can be found in Berger 166-170), a basic summary is enough to show Habermas' interest in normative abstraction—the way capabilities present in human communication can lead the consensus Habermas believes to be a hallmark of true democratic practice. The presence of normativity is not inherently problematic, but even the implication of such can downplay the impressive historical rigor with which the liberal

¹⁸ ...I can be rightly accused of having idealized what were presented as features of an existing liberal public sphere; I was at least not careful enough in distinguishing between an ideal type and the very context from which it was constructed. And I think it was due to this slight idealization that the collapsing of norm and description came into this book. (“Concluding Remarks” 463)

bourgeois public sphere was constructed, ironically devaluing its use as a tool for present-day scholarship.¹⁹

The limitations of the public sphere for contemporary use can be seen by examining the world presented by the film *Kimi*, directed by Steven Soderbergh and released on streaming service HBO Max in early 2022. The relative failure of the public sphere to work as a useful heuristic when watching the film, full of ideas about contemporary modes of association, communication, and political action, begs the question: what value does the public sphere tool have in analyzing modern-day publics?

Kimi tells the story of tech worker Angela, who finds a recording of an assault and murder captured by a Kimi, the Alexa-like device whose CEO ends up being behind the attack. The film is both an overt homage (sometimes to the point of Xeroxed translation) to paranoid American thrillers like *Rear Window*, *The Conversation*, and *Blow Out* and one of the few major movies to directly address the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. How Soderbergh and screenwriter David Koepp (who penned blockbusters like *Jurassic Park* and *Spider-Man* as well as fellow paranoiacs *Snake Eyes* and *Panic Room*) were able to implement contemporary notions of safety and socialization into a script that had begun germinating before the pandemic rather than ignore them (like so many other modern-day American films) is worthy of its own exploration—regardless, the resulting film is full of a great deal of complexity in its under-ninety-minute package (Girish and Krute 00:03:10). Most relevant to this thesis is its interesting notions of public and private, which take the feelings of the *possibility* of omnipotent surveillance being fulfilled in the narrative (by Hitchcockian psychology and plot-driving happenstance in *Rear Window*,

¹⁹ Craig Calhoun writes, “Though the book has perhaps more often been read for its account of the degeneration of the public sphere, the earlier argument about its constitution is both more original and more interesting,” and “the second half of *Structural Transformation* is less satisfying than the first,” both opinions that are difficult to dispute (10, 29).

curdled post-'60s perversion and conspiracy-mongering in its offspring *Blow Out*, and increased professionalization and technological sophistication in *The Conversation*) into a world where mass surveillance is not only the defining features of the fabric of contemporary publicness and privateness but also *accepted* (though not really reckoned with) as such.

Because *Kimi* is a feature film and not a work of sociology, its account of public and private is mediated by conventions of Hollywood narrative—the hero and their character arc, the villain and their goal, and the conflict that pits them against one another. Even within these narrow constrictions, though, the film outlines a notion of public and private that is too unwieldy for the Habermasian public sphere to be a useful organizing tool. The four major throughlines of *Kimi*'s public and private are the growth of surveillance technology across all facets of contemporary life, the COVID-19 pandemic, Angela's response to her personal traumatic experience, and the restrictions limited by the Hollywood plotting of the film. None of these factors act in isolation, but examining each individually first will help us look at the benefits and difficulties of using the public sphere as an analytical tool by first describing them (and their effects on the film's notion of public and private) individually.

The technological system outlined in *Kimi* may be the most fertile area of comparison, as it is the throughline that most thoroughly complicates the normative assumptions that the public sphere requires to exist. Yet it is also the most difficult to attribute to a reality that would make such a comparison useful (and, given that *Kimi* is a work of fiction, fair). As much as *Kimi* takes from real-life technologies (the titular device's obvious parallel to Apple's Siri), its account of technology is equally influenced by Hollywood notions of omnipotent Eastern European hackers and charismatic tech-savvy hitmen. Thus, I will try

to focus more on the general trends suggested by the film's technological structures (and people's relationships to these structures) rather than the devices themselves.

In *Kimi*, apparatuses of mass surveillance are everywhere. Angela's job with tech company Amygdala is to address errors in the search technology Kimi uses, fixing them on a case-by-case basis so that the underlying AI technology can "learn" and give correct answers in the future. The human monitoring is both a source of concern for people and the company's ultimate selling point, correlating somewhat with promises about AI today, which stress the complete elimination of the human element even as human work is vital to its functioning ("fauxtimation," in the parlance of Kate Crawford's *Atlas of AI*).²⁰ It presents an uneasy world in which the mass surveillance capabilities of the smart speaker are both thought to be totally outside human involvement (users activate the speaker by addressing "Kimi" directly, playacting sentience)—and therefore outside the realm of politics altogether—and dependent on it to function. The notion *Kimi* jumps on is that this incongruity gives the powerful room to abuse the power mass surveillance gives them. In the course of her investigation, Angela learns from her coworker that the seemingly anonymized recordings are actually able to be tracked to their respective device, and that specific recordings can be erased as a result (00:36:36).

If Habermas' account of the transformation of the public sphere largely rests on the coming-together of the state and society and how the specific notions of public and private that created the public sphere are no longer relevant to contemporary conditions, *Kimi*'s sense of public and private go a step further. What happens when entities such as Amygdala, whose pursuit of private interests facilitate the notion of publicity that has

²⁰ "Automated systems appear to do work previously performed by humans, but in fact the system merely coordinates human work in the background." (66). Crawford also notes that fauxtimation should not be thought of as a step towards full automation, but as an ideological tactic to devalue labor: "Fauxtimation does not directly replace human labor; rather, it relocates and disperses it in space and time. In so doing it increases the disconnection between labor and value" (67).

replaced the public sphere, now have the sort of monitoring capability a state would only dream of having? The result is a hollow venality that uses mass surveillance to facilitate an inhuman image rather than foster an all-inclusive public. This is not just true of the representational-public-replacement of Amygdala, but of the *polis*-public-replacement of Kimi users as well. Talking to a Kimi neither fosters the inward-facing self-communication nor the outward-facing mass communication that created the liberal subject. Other humans are involved only as easily ignorable maintenance workers, like Angela, or as the self-styled architects of the thought patterns that arise from the algorithms guiding smart-speaker communication, like the CEO. To increase the resolution of the picture, we can compare the jobs done by the American Amygdala employees and the ones who work abroad. Angela and the various levels of management are all based in Seattle, but the film highlights the company's global reach by showing employees (coder Darius, hacker-for-hire Yuri) who do the "dirty work" (giving Angela a dummy code to access the telltale file and tracking Angela's exact location for the hitmen pursuing her, respectively); the contrast between the above-board Americans and the underground Europeans is often presented literally, as the time of day means that the latter set employees are working at night, literally shown in the shadow of darkness. These designations are somewhat indebted to Hollywood genre tropes, but it still presents an arresting image of a global public connected by mass communication technology that still split up by America-centric levels of "public" presentation. The sense of a public fostered by *Kimi's* idea of mass surveillance technology is so far from the ideals of rational communication and equal entry of Habermas' public sphere that the idea may no longer be of any use.

Rare for a contemporarily set Hollywood film, *Kimi* is set in a world where the COVID-19 pandemic exists. Even rarer, it seems to be interested in exploring the odd contours of how people navigated both material and perceived restrictions and etiquette

as conditions changed—the reactions to the early stages of a vaccination program and to a year of shifts in scientific knowledge and conventional wisdom. The film’s spatial building blocks are limited to Angela’s apartment and an undifferentiated “outside,” mirroring the popular experience of isolation for white-collar workers at the early stages of the pandemic. Even as Soderbergh complicates their opposition as the movie progresses, the initial dualism persists as both a set of visual expectations and a reflective memory of early COVID restrictions, which themselves simulate a “return” to classical notions of public and private. That being said, the simplicity of a dualism is not reflected in the characters’ behaviors, which from the start indicate a constant navigation of the much messier social codes that accompany the inside/outside duality. Soderbergh presents a world where physical proximity is still at the forefront of people’s minds; instead of cutting from Angela sending a text message to Terry (her across-the-street neighbor and occasional hookup) to a shot of Terry responding to the message, Soderbergh pans the camera across the street to Terry receiving the message, “tracking” the message on its journey between the two (00:05:49–00:06:04). Out of all of the types of digital communication, text messaging eliminates physical space to perhaps the greatest extent: it includes the least amount of sensory information and therefore requires greatest amount of practice of *embodied* space to function, eliminating the “feeling” of distance in favor of an intersubjectivity between selves.²¹ Yet in this case, Angela and Terry choose to place their messages outside of their default self-embodiment, as if to return to the physical world closed off by COVID-19 restrictions. (The pan is as “false” as the more conventional cut between the two would be, more closely representing the journey of a message sent via tin can and string than through a cell signal or WiFi.) By representing communication in this way, *Kimi* shows a world where physical space has swung back

²¹ For a deeper exploration on the relationship between text messaging and physical space, see the first chapter of Jason Farman’s *Mobile Interface Theory*.

around to being *overdefined*, containing an excess of meaning created by people beginning to reemerge from pandemic restrictions back into the world around them.

Accompanying this new focus on material spaces comes the cautious return to shared social spaces. Terry reveals that he is comfortable eating in restaurants again, asking Angela to come with him to a new Thai restaurant that he hadn't tried yet because "they don't do takeout" (00:19:45–00:20:05). Public transit is eerily empty, but most other outdoor spaces teem with life. Mask-wearing is sporadic and seemingly arbitrary, though it decreases as the movie proceeds. *Kimi* outlines a moment in time in which pandemic-era standards of interaction are known—and known to be increasingly relaxed—but not enforced by any other mechanisms other than personal preference. As a result, COVID's effect on notions of public and private entail strengthening both classical notions—making the line between an interior domestic and exterior political sphere much starker—and the more supple field of action where the limits of these notions are "allowed" to be tested. This isn't to say that these notions aren't always being constituted and reconstituted in everyday life, but rather that the pandemic made this a more conscious action.

Tellingly enough, however, this conscious act is thought of in solely individualized terms. The manner in which individuals choose to impose their own personal boundaries is the main topic of conversation among people in the film—not just from Angela, whose prior traumatic experience has made her admirably forthright in defining and sticking to limits, but by everyone from Terry to an Amygdala office worker to Angela's dentist. The result is a canopy made up *entirely* of personal experiences that has replaced a push-and-pull between social pressure and individual preference. What should be the most "common" issue (public health) is instead purely constructed of personal reactions to (usually dissatisfaction with) vaguely understood rules. Classical notions are grasped

onto because they are simplest and easiest to understand, but as Habermas noted, these were outdated even in the seventeenth century. Angela differentiates herself from the rest of the characters in part because she wants to define and discuss what these limits are, often annoying or frustrating others in the process, but I'm unsure if the public sphere can address a world where the "public issues," even those dealt with as private concerns, are no longer even recognized as being "public" at all.

The third factor that drives *Kimi's* view of public and private is Angela's own traumatic experience, which makes up the primary character arc of the film. Throughout the first half of the film, the viewer gradually learns that Angela's fear of leaving her apartment is due less to pandemic restrictions and more because of a past sexual assault that was ineffectually dealt with by the authority figures involved with the case. As she becomes more involved with solving the potential murder whose recording she captured, she butts up more against the limitations her condition imposes on her until she ends up making the difficult choice to leave her apartment to meet the executive who was too easily able to avoid confrontation on the phone.

The narrative details around Angela's personal experience reveal some important aspects about the contemporary public sphere that Habermas has difficulty addressing—namely, the individual experience with socially constructed boundaries in a world where "the social" has nearly ceased to exist. It is most notable that Angela is unafraid to assert and reinscribe boundaries between public and private in her interactions with those around her. Making use of the increased flexibility in meeting types prompted by the pandemic, she keeps a full schedule through video-conferencing software of therapy appointments, work meetings, and even dental appointments (with help from her own personal set of teeth-cleaning tools). If previously set boundaries are transgressed in any way, Angela sternly reminds the offending party of their established

agreements on boundaries and how to keep to them. This does not just apply to situations that advantage her personally, however; when she learns the name of the executive in charge of addressing crimes caught on Kimis, she spends her entire day calling and recalling the lower-level administrators who wish to pass along her complaints in writing or at a later date (00:32:40–00:34:40). Her perseverance not only gets her a one-on-one meeting with the executive (which she braves her agoraphobia to attend) but also serves as a ballast when the executive tries to throw her off guard by invoking the mental health leave she took after her assault in college (00:54:15–00:55:20).

It is to the film's credit that however "pushy" Angela comes across in a given situation, her efforts never come across as self-centered, even in a way that would be entirely understandable given her experience with the failure of authority. Instead, this constant reinscription of the private always feels like a response to a society-wide *lack* rather than a personal preference. The previous two throughlines have listed some ways the global sense of public and private has been complicated by surveillance technology and the COVID-19 pandemic, but the concerns that Angela responds to never seem as though she's trying to inscribe anachronistic ideals to a social system to which they do not apply. Instead, they are treated as a reassertion of a sort of self-respect that now only seems to belong to those with the power to back it up with force.²² Part of this lack may be due to the loose subjective perspective the film is built around—the firmly anti-authoritarian Angela would likely zero in on hierarchical structures of power and overlook other shapes the public may take—but it is striking to see how often Angela rightfully needs to remind

²² In the film, the only invocation of a governmental *public* (not even a public sphere) as described by Habermas is how the police "put [Angela] on trial instead of [the assaulter]" when investigating her assault, the sweep of the homeless population being protested in the city, and, at a protest, when the assassins pretend to arrest Angela by throwing her into a van, where she is pulled out by participants after managing to unlock the back door.

even friendly people about boundaries that were previously agreed upon and presently being overstepped.

The necessity of creating dramatic stakes and coherent narrative is taken for granted in Hollywood filmmaking, even as such notions are not givens in the reality the public sphere seeks to explain. Thus, we cannot assume *Kimi*'s plot describes a series of events that can justifiably be covered by the public sphere. Just as the public sphere is more of a tool that organizes "disparate lines of inquiry [...]," such as those from economics and cultural history "[...]" into a unified whole of comparable insight and power," the details of *Kimi*'s plot can be seen as an organizing tool through which Soderbergh and Koepp thread disparate ideas into a more palatable whole (McCarthy xiv). We can look at the assumptions present in narrative filmmaking, the fourth throughline, as generative—informing contexts in ways unique to the form—rather than purely restrictive as long as we keep these assumptions in mind.

As Angela becomes more and more involved with the case, what once seemed to her like an impassable gulf between public and private start to disintegrate. We first encounter the protest against a police sweep against a homeless encampment as an overwhelming morass, contrasting with the stillness of the private sphere of Angela's apartment. When an Amygdala van tries to reinscribe barriers by abducting her in the middle of the crowd—the background shifting from overcranked sunlight to geometric black—the protesters help Angela escape and return to the public arena (01:06:29–01:07:49). A bewildering throng has become safety in numbers in just over a minute. Later, after being drugged, Angela is brought to her apartment building to retrieve the data she's stored on a USB stick. With the help from her neighbor, she manages to escape, return to the safe haven of her apartment, and lock the door to keep the pursuers

out. The main hitman, however, is already inside, demonstrating how weak the line Angela created between public and private can really be (1:10:22–1:13:42).²³

Based on the qualifications of narrative filmmaking above, we must be careful with coming to conclusions based on the plot movement. As outlined in Kristin Thompson's *Storytelling in the New Hollywood* and countless screenwriting manuals, escalation and rising action is a necessary component of the Hollywood form.²⁴ That the lines Angela builds for herself are erased as the plot progresses does not alone demonstrate a social truth that the public sphere has eroded with time, but rather that we're reaching the climax of a film. This is why the hitman waiting in Angela's apartment *feels* like a transgression of a private sphere, even when the other throughlines of mass surveillance technology and the malleability of COVID restrictions would appear to have already rendered such distinctions between public and private moot. Yet this feeling is not merely the result of simple emotional manipulation. Conventions of narrative filmmaking (especially the subjective variant utilized by Soderbergh) privilege the experience of the protagonist. What could come across as mere irony ("the villain is hiding in the one place Angela believed to be safe") or obvious sociology ("your cell phone can reveal your location at all times, so Angela will never be safe") is instead actualized as an *experience* because it is presented through Angela's perspective. The apartment invasion can be read as the endpoint of swirling trends that, from a historical perspective, is only ever approached as a squishy general tendency. From the subjective perspective of *Kimi*, the individual

²³ This is further demonstrated by the next scene: Angela's conversation with her across-the-street neighbor, Kevin, who had come to her defense when the assassins brought her back unconscious to the apartment. He and Angela are being held captive on her couch when he accidentally reveals that he knows her name despite never talking to her before, as he had looked up her address records online when cyberstalking her ("It wasn't hard.") (1:14:55–1:15:03). The artfulness comes from the contrast between the schlubby Kevin and the suave assassins on the other side of the room, who appear to be highlighted and accented by the light instead of lurking in it, like Kevin. If he could so easily find Angela's address, imagine how simple it was for a sophisticated operation.

²⁴ Thompson, describing the typical third section found in classical Hollywood storytelling: "Here the climax portion begins, and the action shifts into a straightforward progress toward the final resolution, typically building steadily toward a concentrated sequence of high action" (29).

narrative can *reach* this endpoint, and the culmination of trends becomes laden with both social and emotional meaning that can make tangible certain throughlines about public- and privateness that encourage accessible reflection and criticism. Filmic conventions can provide a clarity that, while ultimately reductive, can allow us to more easily contextualize the hazy world around us.

Soderbergh's direct invocation of the paranoid thriller genre also helps provide this sort of clarity. Genre is not merely a rubric of certain items that "must be" in a film: it consists of "specific systems of expectation and hypothesis which spectators bring with them to the cinema and which interact with films themselves during the course of the viewing process" that "provide spectators with means of recognition and understanding" (Neale 27). In the case of *Kimi*, genre allows Soderbergh to introduce complex technology and have it immediately mean something to the audience—this device is probably listening to you at all times, that device is harboring a terrible secret. This instant creation of understanding is especially important for *Kimi*, which combines technology from everyday life (cell phones), technology clearly inspired by real-world devices (the *Kimi*), and technology invented for the film (the ease of use of Yuri's real-time tracking regime is likely beyond current capabilities); all of these congeal into a single feeling about mass surveillance that Soderbergh plays with in the first throughline. If the technology used in the film had seemed too far-fetched or absurd—if it did not meet the expectations of the paranoid thriller, in turn making it harder for the audience to interact with the film—the things *Kimi* has to say about deception and communication in today's era of mass surveillance would ring hollow.

The film's relationship to the particularly American genre of the paranoid thriller, born from Europeans in Hollywood like Alfred Hitchcock and Fritz Lang but developed fully in the wake of the Vietnam War and Watergate by New Hollywood auteurs, is an interesting

one.²⁵ In form and structure, it copies both foundational thrillers like *Rear Window* and archetypal '70s films such as *Klute*, containing the latter's labyrinthian structure and sense of unraveling hopelessness but avoiding their characteristic downbeat endings (e.g. *The Conversation*, *The Parallax View*) in favor of a Hitchcock-style classical conclusion.²⁶ The subject matter and setting, in contrast, are modern, but they do not have the modern relation to conspiracy and paranoia as a no-longer-aberrant manner of looking at the world, which Frederic Jameson points to as characteristic to the late capitalist era (qtd. in Trifonova 110).²⁷ As a result, *Kimi* feels less contemporary than certain American films made decades earlier that had embraced this mode of thinking, such as Abel Ferrara's cyberpunk *New Rose Hotel*. Despite its relative stuffiness, though, the throughlines of the film do not make the public sphere it presents feel like a '70s public dressed in modern clothes—it has not simply replaced *Blow Out*'s tape recorder with a Kimi device—but rather something that engages with this era's lack of a politically viable public on its own terms.

Soderbergh's use of genre does more than establish buy-in, however. The scene between Angela and Terry mentioned earlier begins and ends with Angela looking across the street through his window, with Terry angrily closing his blinds in the conclusion as if it were the end of an act on stage (00:22:09). Interestingly, Soderbergh (who also edited the film) cuts in a shot/reverse shot of the POV of neighbor Kevin peering at Angela through binoculars, then a shot of Kevin himself, *before* Terry's scene-ending moment

²⁵ See "Towards a narrative definition of the America thriller film" for a useful taxonomy of the '70s ideal of the genre, keeping in mind that it does not cover the later postmodern vintages like *Blow Out* or *Winter Kills* also made by the New Hollywood cohort (Castrillo and Echart).

²⁶ There is a healthy dose of self-reflexivity in Soderbergh's reproduction of the genre, the most obvious being when Angela, trying to parse the garbled audio clip that sets her on journey, drags out an enormous analog mixer straight out of *Blow Out* (00:24:50).

²⁷ Trifonova identifies the relationship newer political thrillers (*Enemy of the State*, *Zeroes and Ones*) have with the concept of conspiracy, which is no longer thought of as being "visible" or "invisible" and therefore is manifested in a looseness of roles/identities ("actantial promiscuity"), conspiracies within conspiracies, and a structural promiscuity built on the global corporations' omnipotence and denial of responsibility (111, 122).

(00:21:44). By placing this shot in the middle of the scene instead of isolating Kevin's role afterwards, Soderbergh creates a rather complicated mix of associations instead of treating the voyeurism as a simple reference to thrillers like *Rear Window* before it. For one, Kevin's voyeurism is no longer separate from the relationship drama that had just played out between Angela and Terry but something that we have been reminded is happening constantly. This intrusion into a seemingly private moment emphasizes the uneasy omnipotence of Amygdala's and other mass surveillance technology present in other throughlines.

In addition, Soderbergh's edit also serves to implicate the viewer in the same sort of voyeurism Kevin participates in, much like Laura Mulvey's reading of the "male gaze" in *Rear Window*. Yet the "ideological correctness" Mulvey identifies as being part of the perverse roleplaying that animates Hitchcock's approach (placing the voyeur/man on the right side of the law, the viewed/woman on the wrong, even when, in the case of *Rear Window*, the lawbreaking situation is created by the protagonist himself)²⁸ is not quite present in Soderbergh's version (23). There is an ideological correctness to Kevin's voyeurism, yes, but it is played relatively straight, without the depravity that finds its way into Hitchcock's version. Kevin is not shown watching Angela and Terry have sex but during the domestic squabble that comes afterwards. (The audience has seen both—Kevin's surveillance is more chaste than ours.) Secondly, as much as his presence jolts the viewer into recognition that they, too, are voyeuristic, he has barely been seen in the film previous to this moment and does not encourage anywhere near the same sort of audience identification the *Rear Window* protagonist does, and thus downplays the queasy thrill the male gaze as a device is meant to engender in the audience. Finally, the expectations created by Soderbergh's use of genre as a tool immediately present Kevin

²⁸ The Hitchcockian touch comes when Jeff (James Stewart) enlists Grace Kelly's Lisa into his scheme as a watched woman, activating his sexual attraction to her (in leering closeup) as a result (01:30:40).

as a suspect in the events to come, but the pure referentiality of his methods to the low-fi paranoid thrillers of the past—the binoculars, the blinds—make his peeping feel almost ironic; he only exists to fulfil a trope, to be a red herring among the satellites and Kimis doing the real surveillance. That is, until he reveals that he was only able to save Angela by memorizing her movement patterns and cyberstalking her to find her address (1:14:55–1:15:03). The same desire for control and that animated Jeffries in *Rear Window* has not been eliminated through Kevin’s “cleaner” voyeurism, but sublimated into a structure that allows to continue to exist in a more neutral form. As Mulvey argues in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, however, the “fetishistic representation of the female image” that “prevents [the spectator] from achieving any distance from the image” is inherent in the “traditional filmic conventions” used by Soderbergh in the film (26). Being aware of this problematic, Soderbergh uses it as a tool rather than simply applying it as a reference: in this case, by linking the false neutrality of Kevin’s voyeurism to the false neutrality of the surveillance technologies throughout the film.

Bringing together these four throughlines reveals the major contours of the notion of public and private presented in *Kimi*: namely, that the state, which Habermas argues absorbed the functions of the public sphere to contribute to its degradation, is no longer present enough to serve as a threat to the normative democratic ideal fostered by the public sphere. This is not a liberatory change, however, as the realm of rational communication that could serve as a field for transformation has been hijacked completely by technological forces centralized by globe-spanning capital. Contemporary communication technology is centered on surveillance and individualized feedback loops (trouble enough for a public sphere), but these technologies, once the dream of the state, are now in the hands of corporate entities and the private individuals that run them. Pandemic restrictions are experienced as individualized hurdles to be leaped over rather

than a collective effort of any sort. Angela's own traumatic past prompts her to constantly inscribe boundaries of public and private as a personal project, having lost faith in authority's capacity to function, and her behavior is treated by the film as necessary for justice to be done. All of these notions are brought into focus by the organizing tool of narrative cinema, whose norms of individualized character arcs (as well as genre conventions of paranoia and voyeurism) arrange these throughlines into visible concerns that, while not directly resembling the world Habermas studied, make the same contours Habermas studied legible in their own ways. Overall, *Kimi* paints a picture of a highly undemocratic world, a notion that Habermas has devoted his academic career to pushing against, but a *type* of undemocratic world—where rational communication is neither possible nor effective—that the public sphere is unequipped to handle.

As much as the specifics of the public sphere make it difficult to apply to a contemporary setting (especially its idealism, which leaves it tethered to tenets of the liberal era), we must look beyond the text itself to identify the full array of its normative currents. Normativity is not necessary intensive; resonance with broader social and historical currents can imbue any idea with an unintended moral imperative. *Structural Transformation* has the notable status of resonating twice, as the context with which it achieved its popularity upon its original publication differs greatly from the fanfare that surrounded its first English translation in 1989. For Habermas at the time of the work's original publication, the democratic elements of the nascent Federal Republic of Germany were not guaranteed, especially as "prudent silence" about the Third Reich was viewed by the Adenauer government as preferable to "a provocative public recital of the

truth” (Judt 271).²⁹ James Van Horn Melton identifies two historical strains that help account for *Structural Transformation*’s original popularity with the German New Left and student movement: the parliamentary *Große Koalition* of 1966 between the republic’s two major parties, the Social Democratic Party and the Christian Democratic Union,³⁰ and a right-wing media campaign against the student movement.³¹ A different sort of resonance was found in the wake of *Structural Transformation*’s first English translation, twenty-seven years after its initial publication. Habermas’ concept had been used as a lodestar by American authors before the 1989 translation largely through the translation of an encyclopedia article published in “New German Critique” in 1974, through which Mary P. Ryan, among others, took her initial inspiration. Being one of the preeminent political theorists of postwar Europe, Habermas’ later work had been engaged with by English-language scholars years before the entirety of *Structural Transformation* had been translated. (*Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, the first volume of *The Theory of Communicative Action*, was translated by Thomas McCarthy five years prior, in 1984.) Yet the response to Habermas’ early work was greater than anybody could have anticipated. Joseph Zammito outlines three contextual factors that aided in “galvaniz[ing] a collective movement” that repopularized the concept (Zammito 91). The bicentennial of the French Revolution, the “grand historical surprise” at the collapse of the USSR, and

²⁹ Tony Judt recounts a minor controversy stirred up by the young Habermas, who published a 1953 article attacking Martin Heidegger “for allowing his Heidelberg lectures to be republished with the original allusions to the ‘inner greatness’ of Nazism” intact (276). Without a democratic character fostered by the state through the moral power of more thorough denazification, Habermas believed remarks such as Heidegger’s would be more likely to be accepted by older Germans who passively enjoyed “the security and tranquility afforded them by the passive routines of daily life in the Federal Republic” while ignoring the “civil responsibility, past and present” that would lead them to challenge such statements (276)

³⁰ That the union held 90 percent of Bundestag seats “‘convinced many on the left that they had no oppositional voice in the German parliament and that any authentic opposition had to situate itself outside existing governmental structures” (3, in citation). Habermas’ idea that democracy necessarily resides outside governmental structures and within a public sphere held great appeal to those who felt disenfranchised but still desired engagement with democratic structures, given that the public sphere does not isolate itself from representational power and is in fact constructed through its interaction with it.

³¹ This campaign fostered interest in a “strategy for creating an autonomous, extraparliamentary sphere of political action [...] immune to the manipulated consent of monopolized mass media,” which the public sphere embodied (3).

the apex of poststructural and linguistic explanation resonated with three academic ideas achieving “preeminence in the American academy around 1989” that all explicitly engaged with the Habermasian public sphere: the new interpretation of the French Revolution from Francois Furet; new feminist conceptions of public and private from Joan Landes; and “the crisis of social explanation” spearheaded by Michel Foucault (92). The 1989 conference that marked the occasion of the translation and which eventually led to the widely cited collection *Habermas and the Public Sphere* references “China’s prodemocracy movement” as an additional event that led discussion about the sphere to be “more than a purely abstract, academic undertaking” (“Preface,” viii). Habermas was one of the most important German scholars of the time, but mere prestige does not account for a reengagement with an historically minded idea Habermas had abandoned for the purer philosophy of his theory of communicative action—it required resonance with emerging academic, social, and political forces to become more than just an early footnote in Habermas’ career. There are normative aspects of the public sphere that stem from Habermas’ beliefs and intentions guiding his ideas, yes, but the greater currents that shape ideas about relevance, highlighting some norms and downplaying others, also contribute to the understanding of what ideals are given power.

Normativity is a constitutive element of even the most historically minded projects—they are not text alone, but subject to the circumstances of their time—but critiques of the public sphere have outlined an explicitly ideological bent that has ultimately made it a less useful analytical tool.³² Moshe Postone asserts that the most imperative task of democratic political theory like Habermas’ is to better understand the specific contours of the contemporary economic/social formation (i.e. the neoliberal

³² When the “basic emphasis on the distinctive characteristics of the eighteenth-century public sphere remains one of the most important and valuable aspects” of *Structural Transformation*, but its normative aspects seem to compel its users to apply the concept to any situation to analyze its democratic character, its use “necessarily become[s] somewhat problematic” (Baker 189, 188).

capitalist formation that followed the postliberal formation in 1973) “in order better to understand the conditions and possibilities of democracy” (175-176). Habermas, accounting for the fact that the normative historical assumptions of bourgeois humanism “have been refuted by the civilized barbarisms of the twentieth century,” suggests “the normative foundations of the critical theory of society be laid at a deeper level” with his theory of communicative action (“Further Reflections” 442). This is the route of greater idealization, and although it may suit Habermas’ later work, its presence in the public sphere contributes to its irrelevance to a study of contemporary life (as shown by its failure to explain novel currents expressed in *Kimi*). That being said, however, the inevitability of normativity means that a critique of Habermas’ idealism must take its inexorability into account. The next section of this thesis will outline a critique of the public sphere (agonism) that aims to isolate and address a specific element that it finds primarily responsible for its normativity (the unity of opinion implied by the public sphere’s exercise of human rationality). Using the notion of the fascicular formulated by Deleuze & Guattari, I argue that attempting to eliminate normativity from a concept, rather than integrate it into its contours, will lead to reproducing the same norms the critique aims to dismantle.

Agonism, *A Thousand Plateaus*, and the normative idealism of the public sphere

Of the critiques that address the liberal bourgeois public sphere’s normativity, the most prevalent is those which attributes it to *necessary unity* of public opinion at its center. These conceptions contest Habermas’ assertion that the political public body that arose in the liberal era required some sort of unity of purpose built around humanist ideals of rationality to come into being and to function, which rendered the discussion and debate at the heart of the sphere irrelevant to the final, necessarily “most rational” result. As Habermas explains it, because the public sphere was built to be antagonistic to the feudal

power of the representational public, then able to be sustained through “critical public debate” in order to civically maintain the bourgeois class interest (“i.e. the protection of a commercial economy”), its *internal* political coherence was taken as a given once conflict with feudal power was settled (*Structural Transformation* 52). Whatever skirmishes arose as a part of the rational-critical debate in the sphere were merely a step of the birthing process of public opinion, which, as the most rational result of these debates, could only be argued against by participants acting “irrationally” and therefore incorrectly once it was determined. This unified interior seems to go against the spirit of discussion at the heart of the public sphere, but its political function, critics say, requires this unity to work.

There have been many thinkers who have sought to address how internal political conflict can function by placing it centrally in their conception of democracy. One alternative is to emphasize the internal discord that makes up discussion and other democracy-furthering works of the sphere, with the hope that placing internal political conflict at the center will help democratic discussion serve as more than a fig leaf for the maintenance of a bourgeois political economy (especially important now that the era of a bourgeois political economy has passed). The modern agonistic conception of publics, pioneered by Chantal Mouffe and others, is a specific response to the normative unity present in Habermas’ public sphere. Modern agonist scholars believe that the public sphere “denies the central role of politics of the conflictual dimension and its crucial role in the formation of collective identities,” a more intensive view of the output of the public that is not as deterministic as Habermas’ class-centered approach (“Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism?” 275). Agonism argues that the public sphere bases its conception of legitimacy, which power needs to impose itself upon the social fabric, on rationality instead of power relations. In the liberal era, the overlap between bourgeois class interest and the use of reason may have been enough to grant the public sphere

political power seemingly on its own, without needing to *exercise* it (*Structural Transformation* 87-88). As times change, however, the structure of the public sphere cannot hold a place for power relations and internal conflict.

An agonistic model hopes to create a structure in which “the other” of the merely *political*—where “the dimension of antagonism that is inherent in all human society,” such as resource distribution, resides—is distinguished from “the adversary” of *politics*, or “the ensemble of practices, discourses, and institutions that seek to establish a certain order” that addresses the political (276). An adversary is “a legitimate enemy, an enemy with whom we have in common a shared adhesion to the ethico-political principles of democracy,” a definition that highlights the importance agonism places on free action within an agreed-upon system (276). The public sphere does not have room for private passions that have not been rationally determined to serve public needs—the swelling of these passions in the private sphere is perhaps one reason why private interests dominates contemporary political proceedings over the public sphere. Agonism believes contemporary democracy needs to “mobilize these passions towards the promotion of democratic designs” as a part of a system that has the capacity to fit disagreement into its limits (277). These passions would not overrun the system and create a free-for-all of individual opinions, however, in part because of a shared commitment to the democratic system and in part because of an affective system identified by agonism scholar Mark Wenman, who cites Mouffe’s reference to a Freudian “libidinal investment at work in the creation of collective identities” (qtd. in Wenmen 198). This places agreement and collective action not on the realm of the deliberative, as Habermas does, but in identifying elements of one’s self in others that appeals to one’s less rational imaginations.

Mouffe’s notion of agonism builds off of notions of political practice previously explored most prominently by Hannah Arendt and Carl Schmitt (Paxton). The Arendtian

sense of agonism stems from the identification of “the fiercely agonal spirit” of the *polis*, in which the elite among ancient Greeks, who saw themselves as transcending the basic needs of living (by shunting such concerns as labor and work to the private household realm), could “show who they really and inexchangeably were” by distinguishing themselves as individuals. Yet inexorably linked to this expression of the self was the maintenance of the *polis*, which was reflexively known by these elites to be the political structure that made this expression possible (Arendt 41). Paired with this ancient sense of public-facing individuality was Arendt’s more modern notion about the fallibility of human senses to create truth, which made it no longer a transcendental concept (275). Both of these notions require the recognition of other people as equals, a necessary interdependence that arises from the fear that political domination leads to power not just over others but over the newly contingent concept of truth, and they also require a political project that fits this new ontology. Furthermore, Arendt believes that politics takes place in the realm of action, the area of “new and spontaneous processes, which without men never would come into existence” (231). Politics that takes place purely in the realm of procedure and ideals cannot generate the potentially liberatory consequences, so an active realm of politics must be fostered for true democracy to appear. This action is fomented, beyond anything else, through the power generated by people “gather[ing] together and act[ing] in concert,” the binding force of which Arendt believes to be “the force of mutual promise or contract” that animates the *polis* (244, 245).³³

³³ A convincing argument that downplays Arendt’s effect on the Mouffe school of agonism can be found in Wenmen 45-57, which finds that Schmitt, not Arendt, is the main basis for Mouffe’s post-Marxist agonism found in *Hegemony and Social Strategy* (1985) onwards. Other have convincingly argued that Mouffe is too committed to pluralism to be as orthodox a Schmittian as Wenmen asserts (Paxon 64-67), but Wenmen makes a strong case about his pervasive influence on the genealogy of Mouffe’s form of agonism. Because this thesis does not go into great detail about the specifics of individual agonist arguments—it uses Mouffe’s as a stand-in for the topic as a whole, taking into account the argumentative limitations that comes from this approach—I believe the advantages of using Arendt as the forebearer for agonist thought (namely, her focus on notions of public and private that are the root of the arguments by scholars writing about the Habermasian public sphere, such as Fraser and Benhabib) are worth the potential downsides.

Regarding agonism's critique of the public sphere, it also takes seriously the implications of the public sphere's unity of outcome as the sphere becomes part of the structure of liberal constitutional government, which allows us to see clearly the issues with its normative idealism. Christian Emden, not an agonist thinker himself but a keen conceptualizer of the same implications that interest agonists, argues that the constitutionalization process the liberal bourgeois public sphere undergoes—how it is subsumed by the republican state to serve as its representational organ—subjects it to a paradox in which “the constituent power of publics always stands in a precarious relationship to the constituted powers of the state and its normative procedures, which are legitimated by an appeal to the very constituent power they necessarily have to limit” (122). In other words, the public sphere is both a part of the state that once sought (and perhaps still seeks) to limit the power of the individuals that constitute it and only able to exercise power because of these individuals outside the state. This is a difficult tightrope when the public sphere existed between the state and the public—having to maintain legitimacy on both sides in order to pressure them—but it becomes fully paradoxical once the sphere becomes a legislature. In a liberal constitutional government, the only way political action outside the state can be achieved through a public sphere “if it is in principle possible to eventually integrate such opposition into an already existing system of constitutional norms and procedures,” which “undermines its emancipatory potential” by funneling its action solely through government bodies (134, 135). If government is the only body through which power can be generated, where is the power of the citizenry coming together as a political body in a constitutional democracy?

What agonism's criticisms of the Habermasian public sphere highlight more than anything else is its transcendent conception of the state and the public sphere's role within it after its constitutionalization, in which the legislature is only affected by public

power that conforms to the already existing body. Any sort of struggle is bound to fail by not integrating into a rationally agreed-upon system; success is achieved only by following norms that are already present and therefore do not need struggle to come about in the first place (134). This conception of the state has a troubling implication for the public sphere writ large, for “if a state already represents the interests of the public sphere, there is no need for the existence of a public sphere, liberal or otherwise” (131). Accounting for both sides of dual pressure of citizen and government in a more democratic fashion is addressed better by the battles for hegemony, temporary alliances, and other concessions to (the existence of) power present in agonism.

Although Emden does not argue for an agonistic program, his thinking is relevant to agonists in how he identifies that norm-centered approaches like Habermas’ are “not oriented towards the future” and conceive of the role of people in the public as ultimately powerless, despite their aspersions towards democratic maximalism (151). Habermas is able to address this paradox for the public sphere as a historical object: the liberal bourgeois ideology of “the dissolution of domination into [...] easygoing constraint” was built into the era’s institutions, which would change—structurally transform—once the assumptions built into the ideology were challenged by different material conditions of later eras (*Structural Transformation* 88). For the sphere as a normative object, where its ideals are pinned to the liberal era, the paradox of constitutionalism still applies, and the role of the people in seemingly democratic proceedings is limited as a result.

Agonist thought is extremely perceptive in diagnosing the problems posed by the public sphere’s normative idealism. Yet it is perhaps too invested in making its *unity* the primary cause of this idealism, however representative of the normative power of Enlightenment-era notions of rationality it is. Finding the solution to idealism in breaking up the unity at the center of the public sphere is difficult to support. Nancy Fraser

indirectly addressed this in “Rethinking the Public Sphere” when describing the role of weak publics (who form opinions but cannot make decisions) and strong publics (who can do both) in contemporary democratic societies. Fraser’s piece is useful here because it has the same purpose as much contemporary literature on agonism: identifying where the public sphere can neither fruitfully describe certain issues with contemporary democracy nor itself generate a critique of the undemocratic facets of this structure. Here, Fraser reformats the account of the public sphere’s constitutionalization into the transformation of the public sphere from a weak public (as the liberal bourgeois public sphere) into a strong public (as the constitutional state). The public sphere’s former status as a weak public was due to its position as wholly separate from the representative public state of the aristocracy, and its transformation into a strong public by becoming part of the state “represents a democratic advance over earlier political arrangements (133). Today, the relationships between weak and strong publics are much more complicated, with strong publics existing in less powerful arrangements and on a much smaller scale (such as in a self-managing institution like a grocery co-op) but also existing as the bodies who have accountability towards weaker publics (such as consumers, who are subject to a complex matrix of forces, discursive or otherwise that cohere into their buying preferences). The capacities of power and decision-making also open the question of how much of a stake non-publicized people should have in strong publics that affect them (such as customers who shop at the co-op but do not have an ownership stake in it). From these unanswerable questions, Fraser comes to the conclusion that no matter the resolutions, they cannot be addressed by a system where weak publics are assumed to be in the same separate position as they were in the bourgeois era or where strong publics are solely associated with the state—there needs to be “a greater role for (at least

some) public spheres than mere autonomous decision making removed from authoritative decision making” (136).

Although Fraser uses the same constitutionalization argument as Emden to show how modern conditions cannot support an idealized public sphere (even using the public sphere the same way agonists do, as the basis of their critique of existing insufficient democratic processes), she separates the sets of publics in which power can be exercised instead of trying to fit them into one body, as agonism does. Fraser envisions “theorizing the range of possible relations among [weak and strong] publics” instead of looking solely at how strong publics can have more realistic parameters (136). The focus agonism places on strong publics ensures that it focuses on the historical unity that made publics strong at the end of the liberal era in turn. By centering instead on the relationship between weak and strong publics, Fraser cuts through the idealization of the historical contours that helped form this conception of strong publics in the first place.

Harold Mah’s “Phantasies of the Public Sphere” delves into the ontological implications of the public sphere’s unity, mainly focusing on the assumption of rationality that makes conceiving of this unity possible. The piece argues that the persistent spatialization of the public sphere—presenting it as “a domain that [any social group] can enter, occupy, and leave,” as if there were well-lit entrances and exits—obscures the rational unity that is even more important to its construction than its theoretical openness and which allows the sphere to cohere into a single collective subject (160).³⁴ Any offshoots of the public sphere that seeks to integrate groups wanting to assert their group identity, such as the new non-bourgeois entrants into later-era public spheres, downplay how the sphere’s unity means these groups “must necessarily appear as the ‘other’ to the public as a mass subject,” having reached the sphere too late to stake claim to the

³⁴ “Its location is strictly in the political imaginary” (168).

universality rational subjects imagine themselves fulfilling (167). As a result, Mah hesitates to use of the public sphere as a historical tool because “the transformation of social groups who fuse into unity is, of course, a phantasy, and one that is always at odds with an empirical reality of conflicting social identities and interests” (155).

Like agonists, Mah is deeply suspicious of any historical organizing tool that assumes a unity of identity at its center, but the purpose of his project orients him in a different direction than Mouffe’s. To better use the public sphere, he says, would be to “figure out why and how certain groups are able to render their social particularity invisible and therefore make claims to universality, while other groups are consigned to public performances that always undo themselves because those performances end up proclaiming their own identity, their social particularity” (168). We can apply this argument to the agonist belief in the “certain order” that promotes “shared ethico-political principles of democracy” to find that a unity exists in the agonist sphere, just as it does in the public sphere. The *objective* unity of the public sphere requires a specific social identity (the bourgeoisie) to transcend its individualized origins to become an ideal; the *subjective* unity in agonism turns invisible the continuous maintenance of the “certain order” that allows for social particulars to assert their individuality in a way that does not diminish their position. The norms that create the arena in which adversaries can spar can easily calcify into a mere set of rules rather than the expression of principles of which they were originally formed; parliamentary technicalities and bad-faith debate can turn agonist democracy into as much of a “phantasy” as the public sphere. By focusing on how particularities can be made visible and invisible in a sphere that requires unity, Mah also suggests how procedures can be taken advantage of and taken for granted in a sphere that requires structure to function.

In its harsh appraisal of the public sphere as a concept, Ari Adut's *Reign of Appearances* also illustrates a weakness of its fellow critique, agonism. Like Mah, Adut finds the slippery spatiality of the public sphere to be a place where historians and thinkers allow normative biases to slink in. His main argument states that taking the public sphere seriously means taking seriously the fact that it takes place in a *space*, with "visual and acoustic [...] content" that is outside of the pure realm of dialogue exchange, which a non-spatial conception of the public sphere thinks makes up the entirety of the concept (15). To Adut, this implies that any conception of the public sphere (no matter if that space is physical or virtual) must include viewership as a primary component. It also has an implication for democratic participation in the sphere, as observation is the way most people interact with the public sphere, leaving power in the hands of those most able to participate through discourse. The fact that the role of viewers does not appear in *Structural Transformation* indicates to Adut that the "physical" aspect of the public sphere is a retroactive addition to what is actually a purely theoretical conception, an attempt to bring it into physical reality.

Adut takes the rest of the book to cover a few ways centering spectatorship can help us better understand things like public events and censorship, but the underlying current is a rebuttal to the idea that the public sphere is a useful tool at all. The Habermasian public sphere's lack of engagement with the space in which the public exists (as exemplified by its dismissal of all forms of participation in it apart from discussion) is itself a normative assumption, "a black box for the conventional perspective" that allows *any* sort of normativity to fit in due to a lack of empirical rigor in constructing the actual spatiality of the public sphere (15). Normativity, then, is a non-isolable element of the sphere—not just in the inevitability of the historical contexts it finds itself in, but as its primary constitutive part.

Compared to the previous two responses to agonism, Adut's claim has less to do with the public sphere's unity of outcome; like Mah's, it is another example of how its loose spatiality can flatten varied types of participation in the public sphere into Habermas' preferred action of rational discussion. Unlike the other works, however, Adut explicitly addresses agonism and finds a similar lack of rigor in its spatiality. He argues that the model described by Arendt shifts too easily between two frameworks (the "agonal" of competition and the "associational" of citizenship) by the virtue of their both taking place within the *agora*.³⁵ For Adut, this gives agonists the best of both worlds by linking both models' purposes into a single conception of public participation that may or may not have existed in the ancient Greek reality of the *agora* (21-22). Even if Arendt's notion of agonism differs from modern conceptions, the legacy of the *agora* can be found in basic structures of agonist thought in the way it requires participants to have both adversarial and associational relationships with one another. Is this an impossible framework only made function by the dream of fulfilling an unworkable ideal, one which never existed in reality? In *Reign of Appearances*, Adut suggests something troubling: could the historical contingencies that make up any kind of public be too complex, too wedded to the structure and outcome of the sphere, to make any application outside of their historical context anything but normative? Is our aim to *account* for the normativity in a public naïve when normativity, in fact, *defines* it?

Much like how the Habermasian public sphere has continued to be a useful tool even for scholars who question its basic premises, the agonist critique of the public sphere can be a useful way to look at Habermas' normativity even if its conclusions do not

³⁵ Like the public sphere, a theoretical space like the *agora* profits from the assumption that it has the same capacity to "contain" as an physical space, when it in fact has the ability to hold as much meaning as the word can fit.

adequately explain it. Introducing certain basic ideas created by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari can place agonism's notion of unity into a context that both addresses the critiques implicit in the works of Fraser, Mah, and Adut and allows it to reorient its own target of critique, the liberal bourgeois public sphere, towards a more fruitful contemporary use.

The rhizome is a key idea that underlies much of Deleuze and Guattari's philosophical project, making it a sensible entry point for their use in this thesis. The introduction of their 1980 opus *A Thousand Plateaus* outlines six principles of the rhizomatic, or that which is interconnected, uncentered, nonhierarchical. To start, we can contrast it with arboreal, or that which is rooted from a point, hierarchical, unified, set straight. The "peculiarly normative power" Habermas recognizes as being held by all classical notions of government and politics—of *oikos* and *polis*, of *publicus* and *privatus*—is the power of the arboreal; this power, in many ways, has come to be held by the public sphere as well (*Structural Transformation* 4). They are the templates that can be fulfilled, failed, or opposed; even if the historical conditions that helped form them were no longer in place (such as the Athenian slave democracy or the formation of a capitalist private property regime), they still contributed to everyday life as the ideology of those who hold political power. One purpose of the rhizome is to offer an alternative to not only these classical notions but also the mode of thinking that granted them normative power in the first place.

The first rhizomatic principle is the principle of connection ("any point of the rhizome can be connected to any other..."); the second is the principle of heterogeneity ("...and must be.") (7). This is in contrast to the arboreal, in which points of the root are only connected to their immediate neighbors on the chain in order to create a hierarchy or dichotomy. The third is the principle of multiplicity, which occurs when the multiple is

made substantive without necessarily having a subject or object, or without being ultimately able to be reduced to a One. This is a rather complex idea that has relied on outside scholarship to make it applicable to real-world scenarios,³⁶ but in summary, the multiplicity, more than anything else, is an attempt to ensure that “the Whole is never a principle, but an effect that is derived from [...] external relations, and that constantly varies with them” in magnitudes and thresholds rather than gridded points (Smith, *xxiii*). The fourth principle is that of the asignifying rupture, in which the division of a rhizome does not necessarily lead to a discrete constitutive part but instead can follow a line of flight elsewhere, transforming into something new. The fifth principle of the rhizome is of cartography, which likens the rhizome to “*a map and not a tracing*,” meaning that it operates through interaction, creation, and experimentation, not repetition (12, emphasis in text). At the same time, the sixth principle, decalcomania, shows that it is important for the tracings to be put back on the map so that possible lines of flight can be found from the barriers put up by the tracings.

The fifth and sixth principles, specifically, point to how to think of the rhizome in a way that engenders true use instead of thoughtless application. A tracing is an arboreal concept *par excellence*: a direct lifting of signs whose power comes from a hierarchical setup of unthinking repetition. But the most useful kind of directional tool contains elements of the tracing, giving a basic bedrock of the orientation so to better avoid the spiraling confusion and untethered directionality of a self-made map.

The rhizome/tree distinction is neither an ontological dualism (a thing being either a rhizome or a tree) nor two opposite ends of a spectrum (a thing being x percent rhizomatic, 100-minus-x percent arboreal). The model looks more like the following: “The [tree] operates as a transcendent model and tracing, even if it engenders its own escapes;

³⁶ *Assemblage Theory* by Manuel DeLanda and *Political Affect* by John Protevi being just two examples.

the [rhizome] operates as an immanent process that overturns the model and outlines a map, even if it constitutes its own hierarchies, even if it gives rise to a despotic channel” (20). The tree is the *process of mapping*, not a map, and is present everywhere and at all times; the rhizome is the *process of rupturing*, not a rupture, similarly constant and omnipresent. This model is known as the machinic assemblage, or the process of “the life immanent to all matter, whether inorganic, organic, natural, or artificial [...] of self-differentiation, self-organization, de-differentiation, de-organization, reconfiguration, and creation at work in the morphogenesis and metamorphosis of everything in the world” (Bogue, 47). For Deleuze and Guattari, the practical importance of this sort of thinking is that Western thinking tends “to relate expressions and actions to exterior or transcendent ends,” placing too much emphasis on the arboreal and that which organizes and stratifies (*A Thousand Plateaus* 22). By pointing this out, then offering an alternative that places this tendency within a wider ontological context, they offer a toolbox to create alternate conceptions of seemingly fundamental unities. Although Deleuzoguattarian thought cannot (by design) be summarized by a single, transcendent, unifying element, the rhizome, as the most basic dimension of its multiplicity, is a useful tool for orientation.

This process can help give us a broader view of the inevitable normativity that appears in every conceptualization of the public, as suggested by Adut. One example is when the different definitions of a word with multiple meanings blend into each other, creating implications that become as much a part of sign as the signified itself. For the public sphere, this agglomeration occurs with the terms “private” (“hidden” and “individualized”) and “public” (“revealed” and “collective”). Habermas himself identified this tendency when outlining the development of liberal rationality as a political force, explaining how the dual meanings of public and private affected how rationality gained steam as a politically salient notion. Authoritarian sovereignty was deemed by its

defenders to *require* secrecy in order to function, so as to not be influenced by “the immature people” over which sovereigns ruled (52). Thus, the opposition (the liberal bourgeoisie that advocated for constitutional law) spoke up against privacy-as-secrecy as strongly as they did the sovereign (individualized) exercise of power. The result of this combination, says Habermas, was “the concept of and demand for general and abstract laws” that were both applicable to all and built off of the rational capacities assumed to be present in all men, rather than edicts from an unknowable, private ruler (54). The belief in the human capability for reason (and more importantly, for the fulfillment of this capability to serve as a substitute for the exercise of power) was “public” in the collective sense because it allowed governance to no longer come from individualized sovereignty; it was “public” in the revealed sense because it was innate to all humanity. Different meanings were able to cohere into one word as a sort of apprehension of social forces that formed the sense of public and private felt by the participants of the public sphere.

There are further implications to the way the public sphere codified these dual meanings, however. Fraser highlights how the realm of the private individual has allowed matters of the household to not just be separate from the collective sphere, but “hidden” away from it (131). For example, domestic violence can be “labeled a ‘personal’ or ‘domestic’ matter [...] thereby shield[ing it] from broadly based debate and contestation” (132). The individualized household realm privileges the hidden, and as such, groups that maintain advantages in this sphere can more easily retain them.

One can see a record of the birth of the public sphere in the bourgeois identification of their civil reality, where formerly solid definitions of “public” and “private” began to overlap. Classical notions of public and private did not account for an area in which private citizens could act as private citizens in public and for a public interest; people were thought to either act for themselves in the domestic sphere and for all and as a

collective (à la the *polis*) in public. Here, Habermas contests not the overlap of the dual meanings, as was the case in the previous Fraser example, but the collective/individual divide between public and private. The public sphere sought to account for the liberal bourgeois tendency for individuals to act for the collective interest as individuals, rather than as a self-identified collective. At the same time, we cannot forget how much Habermas' account of the creation of the public sphere also relies on previously *hidden* forms of inner consciousness turning into public-facing subjectivity due to the promulgation of letter-writing and reading, the "reading public," and the social structures that arose from them. Both meanings of public and private are in play in the public sphere, and they work together in a relatively rhizomatic way.

That said, the eventual culmination of such trends into a unified body like the public sphere means Habermas' account is better described as dialectical movement than as the wandering exploration of rhizomatic territorialization.³⁷ In fact, Habermas argues this very point in *Structural Transformation*, suggesting that the possibilities for future publics must only exist inside the container of the public sphere rather than an alternative as suggested by Fraser and others.³⁸ At first glance, the agonist project seems to present itself as a more rhizomatic version of the public sphere. Creating a form of pluralist democracy that prioritizes possibility without a final resolution of conflict was a stated goal of Laclau and Mouffe's agonist project; furthermore, Mouffe's interpretation of Elias

³⁷ Although the ever-moving dialectic does not remain rooted to one track, it is still supremely arboreal; the external is only born from the contradictions of the internal, and ends up resolving in the original body instead of with a new relationship. Deleuze and Guattari describe Hegel's philosophical breakthrough as extracting from contradictions "suprascientific propositions able to move, contemplate, reflect, and communicate *in themselves* and *within the absolute*" (*What is Philosophy?* 80, emphasis added).

³⁸ In Chapter V, "Institutions of the Public Sphere," he links the private (as in individualized) use of reason first to private (as in secret) associations such as Masonic lodges, "as a public sphere still largely existing behind closed doors" (35). This is because the meaning of public (as in out in the open) was still linked to a meaning of public (as in collective) associated with dominance from a sovereign rather than a gathering of people. The rational communication central to the public sphere "was a threat to any and all relations of domination" and therefore had to be cultivated in secret; the use of reason "had a dialectical character" and could only become public facing "in stages" (35). The public use of a reason, from this perspective, looks less like a breaking-down of classical barriers of public and private and more like their evolution.

Canetti's *Crowds and Power* (also cited by Deleuze and Guattari throughout *A Thousand Plateaus*) points out some of the comparatively more rhizomatic elements of agonism. The act of voting in the parliamentary system, says Canetti, is what "ends the battle" of the "all that is left of original lethal clash" between enemies; it binds the participants together as a representation of the solemn "renunciation of death" that voting symbolizes (qtd. in *On the Political* 22). For Canetti, the results do not come from the anticipated vote totals or relative merits of the cases, which create an arboreal structure of potential cause and effect that can grow to overshadow the acts of governance themselves, but the action taken in decisive moment of voting. Correspondingly, the vote measures the relative position of strength at the moment rather than a transcendent, final mandate. Mouffe argues that this viewpoint unshackles politics from being the expression of "a stage in the evolution of humankind in which people, having become more rational, are now able to act rationally [...] to exercise their free public reason" (22).³⁹ Agonism seeks to take governance off the track constructed for it by the assumption of rationality, which has a predetermined idea of not only what politics should look like but also how humanity should function. For agonists the act of voting parallels the rhizomatic view of language taken by Deleuze and Guattari: not stemming from a "mother tongue" that directs the result of votes in advance (making the actual vote itself irrelevant as a normative binding agent) but a "power takeover [...] within a political multiplicity" that simply marks (*A Thousand Plateaus* 7).

Yet we cannot assume that certain comparatively rhizomatic elements of agonist thought are enough to define it as such. "The root-tree and the canal-rhizome are not two

³⁹ The vote as a final decision is rooted in the assumption that there is only one rational (i.e. correct) choice, and that exercising free public reason is merely the means of reaching it. Vote predictions are similarly outgrowths of this rationality, both in the sense that they mark the progress towards a final goal and that they are generated by the same rational thinking that drives the march to a final result itself, thus allowing prognosticators to "participate".

opposed models,” Deleuze and Guattari write, and the lack of one element does not lead to the presence of the other (20). Selya Benhabib identifies a unified arborescence in Hannah Arendt’s advocacy for the agonistic *polis* as a model for democratic participation in opposition to the “rise of the social.”⁴⁰ For Arendt, the agonism of the *polis* cannot occur under modern conditions—in fact, the realm between public and private, once the public sphere and now a pseudo-space of interaction, is the very thing preventing a realistic agonistic dimension. This hearkens back to Habermas’ argument of why the agonistic *polis* is not a suitable model for the liberal bourgeois era: “the political task of the bourgeois public sphere was the regulation of [the private] civil society” in order to more effectively fulfill its purpose of opposing monarchical authority (52). The political task of the *polis* was to regulate the *res publica*, which was itself the political authority of ancient Greece (52).⁴¹ Both notions sought struggle; each struggled against a different authority—from without for the public sphere, from within for the *polis*—and therefore did so as a differently unified body. Benhabib argues that Arendt’s valorization of the clearly elitist and exclusive Greek body politic is due in part to her “odd methodology” that treats the *polis* more useful as a “pearl of past experience” than as a preferable model, an approach Benhabib ties to critical theorists like Walter Benjamin (76). Yet Arendt was also influenced by Heidegger and Husserl, whose thinking “posits an original state or temporal point to which one must trace back the phenomena to capture their ‘true’

⁴⁰ The rise is the result of the historical processes, mostly relating to changes in economic production, that cleanly divide the private household and the public political state, with “the social” now in the middle and largely driven by the individualist subjectivity fostered in the private realm. The result is “the occluding of the political by the social and the transformation of the public space of politics into a pseudospace of interaction in which individuals no longer ‘act’ but ‘merely behave’ as economic producers, consumers, and urban city dwellers” (74, 75).

⁴¹ Much like how Adut identified that the discussion-centered bent of the public sphere’s self-image failed to account for the vast discrepancy in power between participants and observers in the body, Bruno Latour found that the composition of the *res publica* insufficiently accounts for the issues and objects (the things that “need to be represented, authorized, legitimated, and brought to bear inside”) the *publica* is built around (16). This practice, he argues, allows the powerful to create a reality that bends to their self-interest by “alternating wildly between indisputable facts and indisputable shows of terror,” which only works as a political tactic when the idea of “evidence” is given more weight than the objects that make up the evidence itself (21).

meaning” (77). Here, Benhabib identifies the different strands of agonism’s genealogy, finding unintended overlaps and consequences much as how Habermas found them in the different definitions of public and private in the early liberal era. In this way, Benhabib has outlined the rhizomatic and arboreal elements of Arendt’s theory of history, the result of which is a too-strict definition of public space (stemming from ancient Greek notions) that betrays a “phenomenological essentialism” that ultimately makes it hard to apply Arendt’s agonistic conceptions to modern societies that have modern notions of public and private (80, 74).

Benhabib’s critique shows that opposing the arboreal unity of the public sphere does not guarantee a rhizomatic result; Arendt found an agonistic alternative to the public sphere, yes, but did so by viewing the *polis* as the root of an ideal public rather than a tool to find different alternatives. Yet the “solution” to the problem of normativity implied by this selection of Benhabib’s critique—for Arendt to draw from Benjamin instead of Heidegger, adding the *polis* to the multiplicity of “public” instead of making it the arboreal root of her thinking—does not necessarily address the arborescence that structures the root of a public, instead merely transposing it to a more immediately rhizomatic root. Can an arboreal structure like the public sphere be able to treat its influences as anything other than roots to follow back to their source? What agonistic publics highlight is how they contain the “complementarity between a subject and an object” present in all arboreal conceptions (*A Thousand Plateaus* 6). The liberal bourgeois public sphere is a unified *object*, formed as the manifestation of desires shared by a class to impose themselves politically. The agonistic public is a unified *subject*, in that it eliminates the unity that characterizes the function of the public sphere by introducing the necessity of conflict and a sense of power relations but does not touch the structure that positions and gives context to the function.

The public sphere (as well as agonist conceptions of democracy) implies a fundamental unity—a calculated whole of all social relations, of the public + the private + public sphere—through which seemingly rhizomatic tendencies like multiplication and interconnection manifest in the *fascicular* mode of the circle. In a fascicular system, the initial root is destroyed, but the flourishing of secondary roots that grow out of it retain a unity in the subject (the series of signs and knowledge that makes up the supplementary dimension) instead of the object. In a sense, fascicular movement overprioritizes the sixth rhizomatic principle, placing the map back onto the tracing just to make the tracing more ornate. As a result, fascicular motion reproduces only “the impasses, blockages, incipient taproots, or points of structuration” and other traceable parts rather than the localized, temporary elements (such as the day-to-day environment of a place, which cannot be quantified and is experienced differently by different people) that are just as much a part of the world the tracing seeks to recreate as the permanent structures (13). Instead of using fluidity and movement to escape, the fascicular follows “the supple line [that] rushes into a black hole from which it will not be able to extricate itself” (Deleuze and Parnet 138). What could be a freeing motion away from the center becomes a spiraling into the subjective realm. Deleuze and Guattari cite William S. Burroughs’ cut-up method, the archetypal modernist technique, of constituting “multiple and even adventitious roots” in a rhizomatic fashion that nonetheless necessitates a “supplementary dimension” where “unity continues its spiritual labor” (6).⁴²

Habermas’ conception of society contains a public sphere that arises between the classical notion of public and private; in a sense, it cuts between roots. Even further, it does so for historically contingent reasons, not because of a desire to fulfill a

⁴² The end product of the *découpé* is still something that implies a spiritual reality (in which the cut-up work is interpreted and given meaning) apart from its natural reality. It is still a *whole*, but given wholeness through the necessity of interpretation rather than the will of a creator.

transcendent ideal of what a public should be. The overall cohesion of the resulting system, however, betrays a tendency that is more arboreal than rhizomatic, in that the character of the public sphere itself coheres around a “general interest,” whose bourgeois class character and fantasy of universalist humanism (given power due to historical circumstances) has been covered earlier in this thesis. Yet the agonist critique of the public sphere, which takes the unifying tendency of this general interest as the basis of the sphere’s normativity, can result in the same sort of stultification even as it works against the public sphere most explicitly arboreal tendency. After all, the rhizomatic and arboreal are not opposites, but tendencies present in all things are prioritized in different ways and for different reasons. Benhabib cites Arendt’s methodology as one that still uses the ideal of the *polis*, yet even later agonisms such as Mouffe’s, which are less committed to returning to a *polis* and more interested in creating a framework for the theoretical openness of the *polis* to exist in as a robustly democratic form as possible are unsatisfactory as counterarguments to the public sphere’s normativity, as shown by the rebuttals offered by Fraser, Mah, and Adut. Viewing these counterarguments through the lens of the fascicular can help us better understand why this is the case.

In a fascicular system, “unity is consistently thwarted and obstructed in the object, while a new type of unity triumphs in the subject, [...which] accedes to a higher unity of ambivalence or overdetermination” (6). What would the subjective unity, the “spiritual unity,” of the agonist conception look like? It would be too simplistic to say its desire to work within an already existing system instead of pushing for the revolutionary new. Mouffe argues that liberal democracy is not some transcendent ideal but constructed from “sedimented forms of power relations resulting from an ensemble of contingent hegemonic interventions” (*On the Political* 33). The piece—a response to an argument by Slavoj Žižek that states that the agonistic program, like the public sphere, can only accept

the existing parameters of liberal democratic government—says that this set of parameters is not necessarily a hindrance to “very important socioeconomic and political transformations, with radical implications” (33). Because it builds off of existing power relations directly, agonism is *less* wedded to ideals than radical left-wing conceptions and therefore less prone to the resulting ambivalence to action or too-strict adherence to dogma that Deleuze and Guattari find in the fascicular.

Closer to a fascicular unity would be agonism’s commitment to the tenets of *liberal democracy specifically*. Mouffe argues that this is for purely practical reasons, as “the terrain in which hegemonic interventions take place is always the outcome of previous hegemonic patterns” (34). Yet although Mouffe and Laclau support the “constitutive values crystallized in the principles of liberty and justice for all” present in liberal democracy, and although they see the proper expression of these values in the face of the limitations thrown up by already existing liberal democracies as the purpose of the agonist project, it is sometimes difficult to separate agonists’ advocacy for the values themselves from the political structure that (often imperfectly) houses them (Laclau and Mouffe, xv). Mark Wenmen argues that “leading theorists of agonism move too quickly to situate the *agon* within the horizon of liberal democracy, which after all contains a central commitment to the legal protection of forms of possessive individualism” (16).⁴³ In a sense, Wenmen is making the point that “liberal democracy” is a reasonably arboreal term.

Habermas’ account of the structure of public sphere provides a point of contrast that shows the difference between the arboreal and fascicular. The objective unity of the public sphere, as has been said many times in this thesis, stems from the exercise of

⁴³ Wenmen identifies this commitment as being especially strong in Mouffe, likely stemming from her understanding of socialism “as an extension and deepening of the values associated with liberal democracy” rather than as an ideology opposed to it and the economic formation that accompanies it, as socialism is to classical Marxists (201).

universal human rationality. The process of the sphere's creation is a highly contingent process: the public sphere cannot exist without a rational human subject, and the rational human subject cannot exist without the specific historical conditions Habermas outlines in the first chapters of *Structural Transformation*. Regardless of whether his history is out of date or insufficiently rigorous, the structure of the sphere's unity of outcome is highly arboreal, with specific historical contours leading step after step to a result that leads to its constitutionalization—its development into the legislative body of early liberal governments. Because of the arboreal relationship between elements of the public sphere,⁴⁴ its historical basis is never far from its structure, contributing to its unity on the level of the object itself. This leads to problems of normative idealism once the concept is removed from its original context, but many of the scholars covered in the first section (Fraser especially) were able to use the highly detailed map it drew of its root system to create lines of flight away from the blockages identified on it.

The fascicular relationship the agonist conception of a public has to its historical contingency is somewhat different. The shared commitment to a political structure that allows for the expression of freedom, says Mouffe, is not transcendent, rather “being of an ‘ethico-political’ nature, to indicate that it always refers to specific practices” that express these values instead of the values themselves (*On the Political* 121). Like the history of the public sphere, the history of the structure of agonist democracy is expressly contingent (the aforementioned “sedimented forms of power relations”). Instead of being a series of transformations along one axis, with each “step” reliant on the previous one to come into existence, agonism's element of contestation constantly rewrites the boundaries, and therefore the possibilities, of what can be determined by a political public

⁴⁴ An arboreal system is not a purely negative construction—that its offshoots are tied together to a main root frees its offshoots from the uncertainty of searching for other paths and provides a central station from which to move further, leading to a quickly navigatable (if hierarchical) structure.

and is no longer beholden to the determinism of the public sphere. In other words, historical contingency is not the thing from which agonists build the input and output of their sphere but the terrain on which the output is built. This focus on individual action helps us avoid the perils of constitutionalization, in which the most democratic element of the sphere (the people in it) become irrelevant to the day-to-day function of democratic participation.

This approach, however, opens up the question of how much the sediment of history—its terrain—affects the political outcome of the agonist sphere. It is impossible to build an exact taxonomy or rubric to quantify it exactly, but it is worth bringing up because however rhizomatic the constant contestation of territory may be, it *must* run into the arboreal reterritorializing force of liberalism as part of its current practice.⁴⁵ In Wenmen's opinion, the arboreal nature of liberalism makes a imprint as it "folds" the forces of history into the sedimentary rock that structures agonist democracy; we can look to Mah's critique to see how this imprinting can render itself invisible by becoming, via a takeover by the subject, a constitutive part of the object.⁴⁶

This is to say that the unity of liberalism's arborescence is manifested in agonism not in the outcome of the agonist sphere but in the structure that guides it. The historical forces that cohere into liberalism create a set of norms that aim to generate a predetermined outcome; we can find this in the public sphere. When it appears in the sediment of a system that does *not* guarantee a set outcome, such as agonism, we

⁴⁵ It is appropriate that Mouffe's use of the sedimentation metaphor is a direct reference to Deleuze and Guattari's account of the "double articulation" of the organism, in which a geological example is the primary descriptor: "the first articulation is the process of 'sedimentation,' which deposits units of cyclic sediment according to a statistical order: flysch, with its succession of sandstone and schist. The second articulation is the 'folding' that sets up a stable functional structure and effects the passage from sediment to sedimentary rock" (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 41).

⁴⁶ For the public sphere, this is done by appearing as the abstract, universal individual despite one's inevitable social particularity (168). For the agonist sphere, this is done by taking part as participant. Unlike in the public sphere, an individual in the agonist sphere acts upon their personal political beliefs and makes the differences between participants visible (grouping opponents into the category of "adversary"). What is invisible here is history of the structure in which members participate.

cannot know exactly how much it affects the result—there is no longer a mechanical transfer of historical contingency from cause to effect, as rationalism does with the public sphere. Yet these arboreal norms, *a specific contingency of liberalism*, can still be found in the structure where adversaries face off against each other, trying to guide them towards unity even as their stated and agreed-upon purpose is to oppose one another.

What does this look like in practice? A public made up of members practicing liberalism's collective individuality. The only sense of a common found in the agonist sphere is a shared commitment to a historically contingent structure—it encourages individualist action, but only up to the point where the structure remains intact. As far as political binding mechanisms go, this seems like too loose an adhesive for any time other than an utopian end of history, in which the problems of politics have been solved and only those of the political remain, not when climate change and economic polarization has shown us a different horizon. We should not expect the agonist conception to return to the sort of competitive unity present in the *polis*, and neither does Mouffe; the non-transcendence of the arena in which agonist conflict takes place is a vital part of the theory. But this can partially account for the criticism brought up by Adut,⁴⁷ as the specific historical qualities of this space, the legislature of a liberal constitutional government aim to apply transcendent ends to itself and are not taken into account as part of a full picture of this arena.

In summary, the arboreal historical forces that created liberalism have been blocked by an object, the agonist sphere, that seeks to finally privilege the rhizomatic element of conflict that bourgeois liberalism seeks to ignore. Yet because agonism recognizes only in part how indebted it is to liberalism (it cedes the territory it fights on, thinking the

⁴⁷ The critique being that the associative and the agonistic elements of the *polis* are linked together by agonists *post facto* because they take place in the same "space" rather than cohering intensively by acting in concert (21-22).

specifics to be temporary, but not the structure of its conflict), it also recognizes only a few of the ways the tree-system seeks to reterritorialize it back into its milieu. The result is a fascicular system in which the rational unity of the public sphere can now be found in how agonists view the structure in which they fight: either having “lost its pivot” and having to constantly re-establish new ground rules (and therefore being not much of a structure at all) in *opposition* to rationality or overly focusing on past norms while the territory remains unchanged, where spiraling deeper into minutiae of rules and regulations becomes the action of the day, in a cruel *intensification* of the unifying process (*A Thousand Plateaus* 5).

The normativity of the Habermasian public sphere is not as simple as being purely arboreal, as the critiques leveled at its most arborescent feature (the unity required for its output of public opinion) contain a root-like notion of unity as well, only in its parameters of governance (the subject) rather than the people governing themselves (the object). If we are to better understand the normative idealism of Habermas’ public sphere, it is by recognizing its most arboreal facets (the historical forces that created the liberal bourgeois era) and finding the lines of flight they engender. At the same time, we cannot just destroy one unifying element and call our new structure rhizomatic—there needs to be a connection with something new, or else secondary roots will flourish, and unity will remain in a supplemental dimension. This taxonomy is not a value judgment on resulting arboreal notions, such as the assumption of human rationality, but an acknowledgment of their character. This can help scholars use the public sphere in a contemporary setting without getting ensnared in root-like tendencies, which inherently seek to overcode just as rhizomatic tendencies seek to connect.

The fascicular works as more than a critique—it is a valuable way to reframe certain elements of an object into something more legible for further study. The role of digital screens and screen-based technology in *Kimi* is a prime example of what a fascicular quality looks like in use. Because the use of digital communications (whether through social media, cell phone cameras, or otherwise) is at the forefront of contemporary notions of the public sphere (Dahlberg, Bennett & Segerberg), this analysis complicates the fatalism of the film's first throughline, in which corporate mass surveillance is shown to have destroyed the sphere's democratic potential. Yet screens in *Kimi* serve as more than a simple example: looking at the odd ending of the film through the lens of the fascicular reframes it as an example of insidiousness of the technology at the center of the film, the Kimi smart speaker, but reframes it in such a way that engages with the specific nature of the smart-speaker technology rather than mediates it through the type of visual communication privileged by the medium of film.

The promise of communications technology in *Kimi* is to eliminate the physical reality of space to foster smooth, seamless communication; different types of communication technology seek to accomplish this in different ways. The telephone, the prototypical distance-eliminator,⁴⁸ is almost entirely deployed as a distancing tactic. It is rare that Soderbergh cuts to the voice on the other side;⁴⁹ it is much more common for the other side to be represented only as audio for the purpose of keeping themselves as physically distant from the action as possible.⁵⁰ The purpose of the telephone in *Kimi* is to

⁴⁸ Speaking about the communication inventions of the late nineteenth century and their coverage by electrical publications of the time, Carolyn Marvin found that “the most admired feats of the telephone, cinema, electric light, phonograph, and wireless were their wonderful abilities to extend messages effortlessly and instantaneously across time and space and to reproduce live sounds and images without any loss of content, at least by the standards of the day” (191).

⁴⁹ Angela calling the building super to remind him of their agreement to limit construction during work hours is the only example, and they are in such close physical proximity that if Angela were inclined to leave her apartment, she would have just gone up a floor to tell him herself (00:10:38–00:11:48).

⁵⁰ The Amygdala assistant who tries to stonewall Angela's first attempts to report the possible crime (00:32:40–00:34:40); the main hitman, Rivas, arranging for the hacker in his employ to track Angela's location

communicate as though space does not exist, giving malevolent entities an infinite expanse of shadows in which to hide.

Screen-based communication, on the other hand, aims to *reconstitute* space to benefit a more holistic notion of communication, especially when screens are used as conduit for video contact. Of course, screen-centered spatiality is of a different sort than the space of reality,⁵¹ but the world of *Kimi* is one where these two spatialities are in the midst of becoming undifferentiated, where the ability to create “space” of any sort is enough footing on which to build a reality. Early-film Angela follows the simulation of the real world onto video communication to its furthest conclusion (the virtual dentist appointment), but it is common practice in the film (00:27:50–00:29:33). Soderbergh finds humor in this miniature-making, from Angela’s boss comically threatening his children to quiet down as their noise impedes on his office “space” to Angela being able to “leave” an unhelpful appointment with her therapist by pretending her Internet connection has cut her off mid-thought, but the power to simulate space is clearly something that Soderbergh takes seriously (00:32:32, 00:39:20).⁵²

At the same time, however, screen-based communication in *Kimi* has a supplementary dimension, the text message, whose purpose is to cut through the reconstitutions of space and deliver information directly and furtively. Texting is how Angela and Terry begin their dalliances (00:05:47, 00:17:27), and it’s how her coworker Darius shares the codes that allow Angela to access the recordings of the Kimi on which

in real time (01:04:00); Amygdala’s CEO surreptitiously talking to Rivas when dealing with the aftermath of the Kimi-captured murder and his attempt to murder Angela (00:49:30–00:50:27)

⁵¹ Anne Friedberg’s account of the changes in viewed virtuality over time, *The Virtual Window*, cites Paul Virilio’s notion of the loss of an architectural dimension when viewing something on a screen, where all encounters are flattened to mere exercises in visibility; Friedberg’s commentary on Virilio’s theory, “the polis, agora, and forum have been replaced by the screen,” hint at the political implications of this type of spatialization (187).

⁵² As mentioned in the previous section, the film takes place in a unique time where physical space is being strongly infused with meaning in the wake of the lifting of COVID-19-linked restrictions, and the use of video communication in the film is affected by this trend.

she heard the assault (which he would not give “in person” on a video call) (00:37:49).⁵³ It even serves as an unintended blow to the mass surveillance regime: Angela is tipped off to the fact that her cell signal is being tracked when her mother, who tried to call earlier, sends her a message asking why her phone is off—the phone had been on the whole time, but the tracking software had been blocking any incoming communication (01:06:49). If screen-based communication can seek to reconstitute the physical space whose limits it is meant to destroy, it does so while simultaneously leaving open a more direct line of pure communication. Public and private exist in the same body (a phone or a computer) but with their dividing lines neatly drawn. In a sense, screen-based communication makes real the fantasy of the public sphere derided by Adut, in which physical space now *does not need* to be considered in an accounting of public and private, as the concepts now exist in a form that eliminates the boundaries imposed by physical space.

If we are to believe this account, however, it would be taking seriously the neutrality of digital communication’s mission. As the machinations in *Kimi* show us, that would be an enormous mistake. The final purpose of screen-based communication is to facilitate the first throughline: the encroachment of mass surveillance technology into daily life. The most obvious example of this is hacker Yuri’s ability to inscribe Angela onto a map in real time so that the hitmen can kidnap and force her to delete the recording of the murder, but there are countless other moments in *Kimi* where screen-based communication serves to reorganize space in a way that makes it more legible to the powers that be, and therefore easier to control (01:05:29). Amygdala taking data for retinal scans from video

⁵³ This is an interesting contrast to Angela’s boss’s exhortation to *not* send her initial concern to the Amygdala executive via email and to call instead. (“Don’t email, you infant. *Call* her. Don’t email *anybody* about this; they do not want the aggravation” (00:32:12).) Texts messages are information; emails are evidence.

conferences without permission;⁵⁴ Soderbergh's camera placements when filming scenes with video calls, where the scenes with compatriot Darius frame his image on her computer screen at a more conventional three-quarter, medium-close angle (00:36:41) but those with her superiors are pulled back to a medium and rotated to something closer to a profile view, so their images on the desktop seems to strain to escape the confines of the video screen (00:31:07); the disdain with which Rivas shuts down Angela's gambit about needing her alive to give him her computer's password to access the original recording—he, of course, has already acquired that information (01:17:43).

The use of screens in *Kimi* can be seen a prime example of fascicular movement. The overarching promise of digital communication—getting rid of distance as a limiting factor—only serves a greater purpose of controlling physical space more directly. The potential line of flight—text messaging, which explicitly works as a way to cut through the phantom reconstitution of space that is the domain of the video call—has been stymied by this purpose; it is no accident that in the same shot where she gets rid of her phone to stop it from tracking her, the hitmen arrive in a van to scoop her up (01:07:01). Even as the objective, *literal* unity of physical space has been broken up by screen-based technology, it is for the purpose of maintain a subjective, *conceptual* unity of space, not only reconstituting a more supple kind of digital space but maintaining control over the physical space that, as a condition of reality, must be used.

Applying this to the throughlines that characterize *Kimi*'s account of the contemporary public sphere, however, lead us beyond simple characterization and into productive use. As stated earlier, the combination of these throughlines—corporate-controlled communication technology, pandemic restrictions experienced as individual impediments rather than efforts of public health, and Angela's

⁵⁴ "It's in the terms and conditions of the software," the executive says. "Nobody reads those" is Angela's sensible response (00:55:33).

tendency to reinscribe boundaries alone instead of as part of a power structure that could theoretically aid her recovery—point to a nonexistent public, one not in thrall to a state that has constitutionalized and taken over its prior function (as in Habermas’ account) but which is assumed to consist only of lies.⁵⁵ This doom and gloom is no match, however, for the fourth contour, the conventions of narrative cinema. *Kimi* ends triumphantly, with Angela killing the three hitmen in her apartment, restoring the sanctity of the private but also showing her enough “recovered” from her trauma to have become wise to the limits of the sanctuary it appears to provide.

Soderbergh, though, adds a coda seemingly so intent on imparting a happy ending that it verges on the bizarre. First, the camera swoops around Angela’s empty apartment, where the lights are turned off and with only a single bulb over the kitchen table and bit of harsh morning light to illuminate things. The handheld camera movement is smooth and purposeful, as though to impart that the apartment is now unoccupied and the camera is untethered to Angela’s subjectivity. An upbeat song plays nondiegetically as we course through the entire room and approach the open window (01:24:25–01:25:22). Despite the triumphant music, the apartment does not feel like a place we want to be—even in the best-lit areas, it’s simply too dark to be inviting. Then, perversely, Soderbergh then fades into a matched reverse shot of the window from the outside and zooms out to capture more of the outside of the building (01:25:22–01:25:25). The discontinuity of the fade and zoom out from the visual language used throughout the rest of film is an effective way to signal that things have changed, but the harsh whiteness of the building and the light hitting it, as well as the instability of the handheld camera contrasting with smoothness of the zoom suggests a voyeuristic, camcorder quality that has previously been deployed

⁵⁵ Darius: “Who makes a fake life online, huh?” Angela: “Literally everyone” (00:37:10–00:37:15).

subjectively⁵⁶ rather than through the God's eye of the filmmaker. Soderbergh pans down to Angela, who is walking alongside the building in a floral dress and a newly pink hair color, the opposite of the stylish plastic techware and cool blue hair color she sports in the rest of the film (01:25:30–01:25:47). The camera then turns and pans over to meet Angela and Terry together at the breakfast truck she couldn't make it out to at the start of the film, now looking happy, if still a bit wary (01:25:55). Soderbergh then ends the film on a freeze frame of a smiling Angela, another signature move from the director (*Ocean's Twelve*, *Out of Sight*) but which is also completely disconnected from the prior visual language of the film (01:26:05–01:26:15). We have not quite finished, however—as the film cuts to the closing credits, a voiceover of a Kimi cheerily saying “I'm here” pop in in time with the music (01:26:15). The film ends.

Although the scene's incongruously upbeat visual style may suggest otherwise, I would hesitate to deem it an ironic commentary on the necessity of Hollywood endings or a simple subversion of the downbeat finales of the paranoid thrillers *Kimi* otherwise explicitly copies. The fourth throughline may be the primary element driving this scene, but that does not mean the other three are ignored. The street is much more crowded than it is when Terry goes to the food truck at the start of the film (and its passersby are conspicuously maskless), marking a change of COVID-era conditions that accompanies the passage of time signaled by Angela's new hair color. Her makeover also signals a resolution of Angela's trauma-derived agoraphobia, even though, if taken at face value, this outcome feels overly settled and pat. Most importantly, by ending with the audio of Kimi reminding us of its omnipresence, it ensures the first throughline (the most potent

⁵⁶ The handheld shakiness of the shots that track Angela after she leaves her apartment (00:47:24–00:48:00) capture the subjective experience of the anxiety she feels in the moment, and the previously discussed shot of Kevin's point of view with the binoculars is another example. Neither of these, however, contain the uncanny uniformity of the zoom out, which suggests a more automated, less human hand behind the controls.

throughout the film) has not been overcome by the completion of Angela's personal arc or the invocation of narrative conventions. In this scene, Soderbergh has made the image discordant to plant the seed of doubt about the implied veracity of the visual information presented by film; the cold truth about corporate mass surveillance is told only through audio.

This discrepancy presents an interesting parallel to the two types of technology at the heart of *Kimi*: the visual-forward screen-based technologies and the audio-forward smart speakers like the Kimi itself. Like the rhizome and the root, they aren't a dualism, where the presence of one overrides the other—Angela's job monitoring and fixing Kimi's programming is done through a screen, and many of the video calls Angela uses to communicate for work could just as easily be done aurally through a phone, and may have done so before the pandemic—but they still present two different types of mediated communication and surveillance. Compared to the complex levels of inscription and subversion present in screen-based technology, the audio technology of the Kimi functions in a much simpler, more opaque way. As mentioned in the previous section, the audio functionality of the device allows users to playact sentience, talking to Kimi as if they are asking an especially helpful friend a question. It presents itself as the apolitical, "safe" version of the phone calls that are represented so furtively in the rest of the film—because it is not human, it is outside of the realm of politics. The mass surveillance throughline of the film is a clear retort to this utopian mode of thinking (and to the Apple-like presentation of the device that facilitates it), intent on showing that whatever interaction with technology that seems simple is constructed as such to obscure the exercise of power behind it. Text messages seem to counteract the mediation of space offered by screen-based technology, but they are ultimately unsafe, part of the same structure of mass surveillance to which they are thought to be an alternative. Only the

powerful (CEOs) and the keyed in (the tech-savviest and most disgruntled employees, like Darius) can separate themselves from the Kimi-led panopticon.

Soderbergh is an intelligent enough director, however, to know that the mere presence of this difference within the film isn't enough to make it meaningful—it needs to engage with the medium of film itself to truly stick. Of all major American directors, he is the least precious about the form, having experimented with lower-fi methods of both creation⁵⁷ and distribution.⁵⁸ In her reading of Soderbergh's *The Limey*, Lee Carruthers finds that his use of film history in the text of the film (casting '60s icons Terrence Stamp and Peter Fonda to serve as "idols" brimming with contextual implication, as well as using footage of a younger Stamp from Ken Loach's *Poor Cow* within his film to "[bring] together two discrete moments in Stamp's career within a single motivated context"), in combination with his unconventional editing scheme, allows the audience to better grasp its "wider thematic project" of "defamiliarization / familiarization" and to "recognize the rapport of old and new, and to actively mediate the distance between them (16, 19). The thought Soderbergh puts into the consideration of the medium of film—from its content to its production, its history to its structure—can be extended to his work in *Kimi* as well.

There are two scenes where the characteristics of audio and visual technology come into dialogue most overtly with the privileging of the visual inherent to the medium of film,⁵⁹ and it is in the contrast between these two scenes where the fascicular can most

⁵⁷ The experimental *Schizopolis* and *Full Frontal*; the iPhone-shot *Unsane* and *High-Flying Bird*

⁵⁸ *Bubble*, whose simultaneous release in theaters and on cable in 2006 was the first for an Oscar-winning director (Eller).

⁵⁹ The *nature* of how the image is privileged is perhaps the foundational question of film studies, but its primacy over audio as film's defining feature is built into its very medium. For example, in "The Evolution of the Language on Cinema," André Bazin argues that the initial introduction of sound into silent cinema allowed directors to easily insert a "bargain-rate reality" into a form that was developing more expressionistic forms of editing when in its silent form, returning to the limited perspective of a live-theater audience (26). Charting the contemporary developments of directors such as Orson Welles and the Italian neorealists, Bazin found that auteurs had learned to "write in film" once again, adjusting to sound once again use montage as a tool of expression rather than a slavish reproduction of reality, "a much higher degree of realism" (38, 39). In Bazin's argument, the capabilities of synchronus sound in cinema are important so far as they lead to the privileging of a certain form of editing or image composition.

clearly be seen. The first is the turning point of the film, when Angela is able to comb through the entire recording history of the device on which she first picked up the muffled assault and learns, with new and horrifying clarity, that the woman was murdered (00:40:27–00:44:35). At the start of the scene, Soderbergh pointedly moves Angela away from her computer screen when she analyzes the file, having her ride her exercise bike as she listens to the data on her phone to experience it exclusively through sound (00:40:27–00:42:07). Here, however, Soderbergh employs a formal gambit. As the once-garbled audio becomes audible, the film cuts to a disturbing close-up of the woman's face confronting the CEO (00:42:07). The slightly elevated camera angle, flashlight-esque lighting, and extreme vignetting of the image is unlike anything we've seen in the film before, invoking the voyeurism of a hidden, zoomed-in security camera more than the human perversity of Kevin's earlier point-of-view peeping. As Angela continues to the next entry in the woman's Kimi, the film cuts to the "image" of this recording, shot in a style similar to the previous entry. We see the woman get knocked down by intruders, strangled to death, then wrapped in plastic (00:43:05–00:44:12). Soderbergh cuts between the impressionistic depiction of the murder and Angela's shocked reaction until she collapses, where a flickering image of the body disposal (wrapping and duct-taping captured aurally by the Kimi, imagined visually by Angela) is placed over the image of her weeping, both taking up the frame simultaneously (00:43:31–00:44:12). Instead of the audio wave files on her computer and phone that formed the image of the prior Kimi recordings, Soderbergh chooses to represent the most important recordings not just visually, but *as though they had been recorded by a camera*.

The second scene is the freeze frame that ends the film. After signaling the inviolate status of the image in the murder scene, Soderbergh inverts the relationship between

visual and audio in the final shot. In the former scene, the visual “recording” of the audio of murder needed to simulate the furtive style of a hidden camera in order to represent its method of capture; it was tethered to a signifier regardless of its actual content. In the second scene, the non-diegetic audio of the Kimi breaks through the freeze frame—the most over-the-top indication of finality available to an editor, to the point that is rarely used in contemporary American film without irony. The implication is that the Kimi is everywhere, even outside of the visual frame of the film itself. Soderbergh has caused us to doubt not just the visual image presented by the film, as mentioned above, but the medium of film as a whole—and with it, the screen-based communication the film image has been associated with throughout.

This association is where we can most clearly see the use of the fascicular in *Kimi*. It is not enough that screens are working to construct a conceptual unity of space even with their potential lines of flight: the visual information presented by screens coalesce into an unity within the image-based medium of film.⁶⁰ A director like Soderbergh, who has a history of experimenting with form in all facets of the filmic medium, is canny enough to complicate the *deterministic* implication of this notion by suggesting that audio has capabilities of its own. His playful hint at audio’s eventual dominance in the freeze frame that ends the film presents an alternative to filmic norms without suggesting it can topple the conventions with which Hollywood filmmaking is built. The Kimi audio that ends the film is his acknowledgment of the contingency of supplemental dimension of meaning formed by narrative convention, cinematic technique, and the physical realities of image-projection itself: rules that facilitate interpretation while simultaneously restricting it.

⁶⁰ The fact that Soderbergh chooses to transform the most important event of audio-only information communication (the reveal of the murder) into the visual language it has otherwise been contrasted with is extremely telling in this regard.

In short, the arboreal root system is not the screens themselves, but the medium of Hollywood commercial film and its privileging of the visual. When the realms of text messages and audio offer alternatives to the dominance of images/screens (corresponding to the dominance of the tech companies that serve as the villains in the plot), they cannot offer an alternative that doesn't reproduce the norms of commercial films—a fascicular irony that Soderbergh winks to in his film's strange ending, which hints at an alternative to the pessimistic determinism of the public sphere he presented earlier.

This section aimed to explain a critique of the public's sphere's normativity that sought to address the unity at its center: that of the agonists. Using Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the fascicular, however, it found that merely addressing one normative element does not necessarily lead to an alternative free from idealism. Although it may be argued that *no* notion of a public can be rid of the normativity that many of the public sphere's critics think damns the concept to uselessness, this is not necessarily as hopeless as it sounds. The fascicular use of screens in *Kimi*, for example, adds resonance to Soderbergh's commentary on current technology's effect on the public by acknowledging type of communication the medium of film privileges. Therefore, the use of the public sphere in a contemporary setting is possible as long as one takes into account its arboreal tendencies—and does not employ critiques that themselves are rootlike. Far from being consigning the public sphere to the dustbin of history, the public sphere can still offer much as an organizing tool without reproducing the ideology of the era in which it was first formed.

Lines of flight

This thesis started with a question: what does a contemporary American public look like (if it even still exists)? The purpose of the work is to serve as a first step to answering it by bringing together three main sources through which new ideas can be formed. Habermas and the public sphere served as both an exemplary source for the historical basis of how a multitude of forces joined together in the liberal era to help create the public sphere (as well as people's sense of being part of it) and a reference point for the dominant notion of what being in "a public" means to Americans today. Deleuze & Guattari provided a tool (the rhizome) to address the normative idealism that forms when these two uses of the public sphere coalesce, in addition to providing a wealth of additional concepts (unused in this thesis but available for future exploration) that can create lines of flight away from conceptions of the modern public sphere that feel irrelevant or hollow. Soderbergh, in *Kimi*, presents both a world in which the public sphere, in its structurally transformed state, is wholly unequipped to handle and an prime example on how Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the fascicular can serve as a way to deepen our understanding of certain elements or critiques.

Despite the seeming opposition between Habermas and Deleuze & Guattari—the former the steady liberal, the latter the bomb-throwing postmodernists—I was drawn to bringing together these two sets of thinkers because of their similar goals. Habermas' conception of the public sphere as existing between classical notions of public and private seeks to accomplish a similar goal to the multiplicity as described by Deleuze and Guattari: "to escape the abstract opposition between the multiple and the one" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 31). Classical notions of public and private place the multiple entirely within the former and the one within the latter; Habermas' conception does not discard these notions but instead combines and subverts them, with the public sphere emerging

between. With the multiplicity, the one still exists within the multiple elements that make it up, but it does not contribute to the multiple in a way where its effect can be singled out. At the same time, the multiple cannot overpower and overcode its own subjectifying notions onto the one, as this would not only change the relationship between the (singular) elements in the field, but eliminate the need to look at this relationship in the first place—the subjectifying notions, not the elements themselves, would become what “defines” it.

This thesis has barely touched the surface of how a Deleuzian construction of the Habermasian public sphere could proceed. Further avenues of study are legion, especially those that utilize the vast set of tools presented by Deleuze and Guattari. For example, Deleuze has written extensively on his own notion of subjectivity, both via an exploration of Hume’s theory of human nature in *Empiricism and Subjectivity*, his first book, and on his own terms with Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*’s seventh chapter, “Year Zero: Faciality”. A more in-depth examination of what the contemporary American public sphere would look from a Deleuzian perspective could be accomplished by integrating the work of Manuel DeLanda, which aims to demystify the Deleuzian notion of the assemblage by collecting it into a “material social ontology” that exhorts us to “work on the society in which we find ourselves, tracking the flows of matter and energy, destratifying hardened institutions, setting into flux human practices that have sedimented” (*Assemblage Theory* 4; “Non-Organic Life” 155). Furthermore, Deleuze’s own study of film (*Cinema 1* and *Cinema 2*) contains a great depth of conceptual context with which to look at the images presented in film—perhaps there is an opportunity to more closely link his more political- and sociological-focused work with Guattari to the purely philosophical “cinematographic” concepts (building largely from his study of Bergson) in the *Cinema* books.

These tools would help us build a notion of a public sphere that could better handle the throughlines present in *Kimi*—corporate control of mass communication technology, pandemic restrictions, and individual subjectivity that differs from the liberal bourgeois version—that the Habermasian version has difficulty addressing. Instead of viewing these topics on a single axis of their structural transformation (how much the public sphere has changed from its original, implicitly privileged state), the two axes of the assemblage⁶¹ can give a more complex view that takes into account how the signifier of the “public sphere” works *independently* to create its own norms and patterns. For Deleuze and Guattari, it is “error to believe content determines expression by causal action,” and opening up the public sphere in this way could help address the normativity that makes it less useful for modern implementation (*A Thousand Plateaus* 89).

More than anything else, I hope this thesis serves as an example of rhizomatism in action. The normative idealism of Habermas’ public sphere cannot be unwedded from the arboreal liberalism from which it first appeared—potentially dooming its application to publics in the contemporary era—but the skill shown by Habermas in collecting the vast array of forces (social, economic, historical, etc.) that form the sphere signal a concept that should not be thrown to the wind. Connecting an outmoded liberal conception of the public to postmodernists *par excellence* Deleuze and Guattari may seem like a fool’s errand, but by heeding their command to produce “the most abstract and tortuous of lines of *n* dimensions and broken directions,” we have found the inevitable line of flight (11). Now, to follow it.

⁶¹ The x-axis of de- and reterritorialization and the y-axis of content and expression (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 88).

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