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de Waard, M.

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# Publics, Memory, Affect (or, Rethinking Publicness with Peter Watkins and Hannah Arendt)

*Marco de Waard*

## 8.1 INTRODUCTION

No inquiry into the public humanities would seem complete without consideration of the experiential modalities through which members of the public—or, better, of publics in the plural (cf. Warner 2002)—orientate themselves toward the public domain, developing and sustaining a sense of themselves as potential political actors. Those experiential modalities range from the deliberative and the participatory to the imaginative and the affective, and the latter may productively be approached, or so it will be argued, by attending to cultural evocations of historically specific public life environments—which is to say that some form of cultural memory is involved. The point of departure here will be the ongoing revival of interest, across the humanities, in the work of Hannah Arendt, whose account of political action as the exercise and experience of public freedom offers a unique starting point for exploring those modalities and for interrogating the conditions in which a sense of publicness may be nourished—and thrive—in the first place. As we will see, “action,” in Arendt, is an essentially fragile category, on account of the facts of human plurality and interdependence to which she relates it in her thought. And yet Arendt wrote powerfully about the role of memory (or remembrance) and narrative (or what she simply called “stories”) in constituting a “common world” where the relationships created by action and speech might be consolidated and prolonged

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M. de Waard (✉)

Amsterdam University College, Amsterdam, Netherlands

e-mail: [J.M.deWaard@uva.nl](mailto:J.M.deWaard@uva.nl)

(1998, 175–207). In what follows, I will first consider how recent Arendtian public sphere theory has taken up this relationship between (political) action and the (public) world that sustains it, leading to a new attentiveness to memory, affect, and more broadly dynamics of transmission. Next, I will turn for a case study to the collaborative method of film-maker Peter Watkins, whose work with a mnemonic counter-public of actor-participants resonates with Arendtian thought in ways that illuminate both. I will end by proposing a concept of “imaginaries of publicness” to further bring into focus the nexus of experiential qualities which are at stake here, and which include something like attachment to publicness itself and the relationships it permits in society and culture. At heart, the imaginaries whose concept I want to advance are about keeping the idea of publics imaginatively available as both a cultural and a political form, and about maintaining a sense of the possibility of collective world-making that is held out by it across moments in time.

## 8.2 ACTING IN PUBLIC: ARENDTIAN DEPARTURES

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has underscored, in dramatic form, the extent to which the shrinking or closing down of public spheres—certainly in their physical dimensions—is a phenomenon that may affect publics viscerally and emotively in a way that is about more than the loss of access in a purely formal sense. As much of public life was put on hold, the desire to appear as members of a (political) public paradoxically intensified: something that might help explain the intense momentum and special affective charge of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests that exploded internationally in the late spring of 2020, occasioned by the violent death of George Floyd in Minneapolis in May, and coming in the immediate aftermath of a tentative relaxation of lockdown measures stringently implemented in countries around the globe. Not only Arendt’s account of the human faculty for “action,” but also her conception of the public realm as a “space of appearances,” has the capacity to speak to this situation. Action, in Arendt, is a fragile domain of activity in that it is unpredictable and transient. In this regard it contrasts with the activity of “work,” which results in products that are durable and testify to a degree of control, even mastery, on the part of their maker. As she puts it, we “always act into a web of relationships,” and therefore “the consequences of each deed are boundless, every action touches off not only a reaction but a chain reaction, [and] every process is the cause of unpredictable new processes” (Arendt 2018, 306). What nonetheless makes action a privileged domain for her, and indeed, what makes it political in a broad and egalitarian sense, is that it is the one domain of activity where we disclose who we are to others: “In acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world” (Arendt 1998, 179). The BLM protests arguably generated just such “spaces of appearance.” As examples of the human capacity to “act in concert” (Arendt 1998, 179),

they permitted people to disclose themselves as political agents while affirming the condition of plurality as one that at the same time separates *and* unites.

In the context of public humanities research, I am interested in how Arendt's action concept—which for a long time was read as strictly demarcated from non-political domains of activity, to the point of seeming overly formal or restrictive (or both)—has recently been (re)inscribed into a rich continuum of cultural practices that include public and political art as well as forms of mnemonic and affective transmission. Indeed, if an earlier moment of reappraisal of Arendt was largely internal to the field of political and democratic theory (e.g., Honig 1993, 1995), the current revival assumes a wider radius of application for Arendtian thought, adding a distinctly novel coloring that reflects political experiences specific to the current juncture. As new dynamics of politicization arose in global protest cultures from the 2010s onwards—often centered on preserving the very publicness of public space as such—new political and social ontologies have emerged in which Arendt would seem to resonate rather more easily than before (cf. Mitchell 2012; Butler 2015). Crucially, they have invited new attention for the role of theatricality, embodiment, and staging in contemporary public spheres, discovering in Arendt a productive interlocutor insofar as her account of action as inherently theatrical anticipates current trends to approach theatre and theatricality in an “expanded”—aesthetico-political—sense (Schmidt 2017, 124; cf. Arendt 2006, 152). I would add that Arendt's theorization of politics and action speaks with equal eloquence to the new attention in humanities scholarship for the relations between memory work and activism—as in recent calls that more attention is paid to “the mechanisms by which positive attachments are transmitted” in public culture (Rigney 2018, 370). My premise here is that the public humanities might function productively as a site of encounter to host this kind of interdisciplinary conversation and inquiry, while an Arendtian orientation might also give guidance to calls within this emergent field “to take seriously publicness as a form of authority in and of itself” (Mullen 2016, 197).

For my purpose in what follows, two recent inquiries will be of special pertinence; both are daring Arendtian theorizations of the experiential texture of modern publicness. In a lecture series published as *Public Things: Democracy in Disrepair*, Bonnie Honig has put forward “a lexicon for a political theory of public things” in which Arendt, surprisingly, is read together with the object-relations theory of child psychologist D.W. Winnicott (Honig 2017, 37). The idea is that precisely because Arendtian “acting in concert” is fragile and transient, it needs the support of stabilizing forces that help bestow a measure of longevity and reliability on the “common world” that is constituted by human “words and deeds.” Such forces might be found in the infrastructural world of “public things”: just as in Winnicott one becomes attached to so-called transitional objects that mediate one's relationship with the world—even or especially when they suffer damage, and they “respond” by demonstrating their object permanence—so the public in Arendt's account

of action may cultivate attachment, in Honig's reading, to the public libraries and bridges that thereby come to function as a "democratic holding environment" (54). Appropriately, this line of reading makes a lot of room for a notion of Arendtian "care." Honig's reorientation converges with Patchen Markell's, who, in a series of articles on Arendt (Markell 2006, 2011, 2014), has similarly sought to expand received understandings of Arendtian action in a way that takes it "away from the thematics of the moment" to affirm its interdependence with domains of activity whose politicality is not always easily discerned (Markell 2014, 115). However, while Honig uses Arendt to rethink how "public things" "mediate our relations with others and with ourselves as subjects and citizens" in public space (Honig 2017, 38), Markell attends to the temporalities involved in bolstering our sense of ourselves as participants in public action. Against a longstanding reading of *The Human Condition* and *On Revolution* which understands the revolutionary "beginnings" to which Arendt attended in terms of exceptional (and exceptionally fragile) "moments," Markell draws attention to the retrospective framing through which Arendt prolongs those "beginnings" to make their aftermaths a vital part of the action context itself. Simply put, what this means is that the time of action thickens as well as lengthens: for Markell, it includes what he dubs "power-after" (2014, 126), a temporality that includes acts of augmentation and more broadly cultural transmission to keep the political energy of "founding deeds" alive. As I see it, one exciting result of this thickening of Arendtian action time is that it folds subjects' inner "attunement" to publicness, as Markell calls it, into the category of "action" itself, and that it makes room, in doing so, for the role of the arts and cultural practices in giving political action length of duration—and, indeed, a path or a course (Markell 2006). It is not coincidental that in both Honig and Markell, Arendt's "work" appears as a more important and valued domain of activity than in readings that take *The Human Condition* to privilege the capacity for "action" at the expense of what she calls "work" and "labor." While forms of "work" like storytelling (and other acts of remembrance) would not commonly qualify as integral to Arendtian action, they can now be seen to be right at the crossing point where political and artistic or creative forms of agency might meet.

My aim here is not to add another reading of Arendt to these stimulating reworkings. Rather, in the spirit of contributing to public humanities debates, I aim to show how these perspectives on the relationship between political action and dimensions of cultural production and transmission open up new possibilities for analysis and interpretation. The case of Peter Watkins's film-making and participatory method will be used here to show how a reconstructed Arendtian framework which includes the notions of "attachment" and "attunement" helps us analyze, and better understand, some of the imaginative and affective forms through which cultural production may resituate us vis-à-vis today's public spheres—whose publicness is not only affirmed, but may be reinvented, in the process. I will preface the consideration of this case with some brief remarks on the notion of publics, seen as a cultural form.

### 8.3 PETER WATKINS'S IMAGINARY OF PUBLICNESS

Before clarifying the concept of “imaginaries of publicness” and developing a working definition (as I attempt to do in the final section of this essay), and before attending to my case study (the aim of the present section), let me specify the stakes by demarcating this concept from other social and cultural imaginaries, most typically national ones, that have a specific and more easily delineable chronotope. I take my cue here from Michael Warner’s proposition, in his seminal *Publics and Counterpublics*, that we see publics as “a cultural form, a kind of practical fiction” that is marked by qualities of fundamental openness (Warner 2002, 8). In contrast to imagined communities like the nation, which put down firm coordinates in time and space, regulating membership through the assumption of an “outside” (cf. Anderson 1991), publics *qua* cultural form include us through their discourse by addressing us as “strangers” who might be nonidentical with the object of address that is projected by the discourse itself (Warner 2002, 74–76). Effectively, we are teased into membership of these publics by “mere attention” alone (87), in awareness of the commonality this creates with people who might be different. This emphasis on openness, voluntary participation, and “stranger-relationality” (75) is not meant to idealize publics—Warner recognizes all too well that there are “damaged forms of publicness” whose world-making is shaped by “conflict with the norms and contexts of their cultural environment” (63)—but it is to define them through contrast with forms of community-making that are more forcefully interpellative or even impositional, and where a clearly contoured identity is held out as a putative social ground. For Warner, the experience of being part of a public leaves much greater room for the transformative or, as he calls it, “world-making” capacity that is involved in this reflexive form of self-organization. Insofar as public world-making is orientated to a place, it is through what I would call a kind of contingent belonging: it works by attaching not so much to a place as such, as to the public life forms and possibilities of co-creation which are enabled by that place, in a way that need not rely on fictions of origin, self-identity, authenticity, or immediacy.

In contrast with national imaginaries, then, an imaginary of publicness may accommodate a rather more horizontal, pluralistic, and indeed more democratic vision of the form of collectivity to which it addresses itself and of which it holds out an image. Certainly, the case of Peter Watkins might help us see how it is precisely by keeping the idea of a public open that such a vision would be able to emerge and find, as it were, a place to settle. Right from the start of his career in film-making, in the late 1950s, Watkins’s central ambition has been “to break down the artificiality of conventional cinema and to lower the barriers that usually exist between subject and viewer—in order to engage members of the audience as individuals who must also participate in the film experience” (Gomez 1979, 138). It is thus consistent that in his writings as a media theorist and critic, the term “publics” always carries an aspirational

and strong normative thrust.<sup>1</sup> In a self-interview from 2005, for instance, he reflects on his method, working with non-professional actors, as follows: “I believe that the process by which the ‘actors’ in my films participate in the creative act shows that political action can be linked to creative action. It is a process by which the public take charge of the way that history is presented”—more so than “is usually allowed by the media” (Watkins 2007, 60). In the early BBC film *Culloden* (1964), he used historical re-enactment scenes within an eighteenth-century setting that was anachronistically penetrated by modern media techniques (e.g., live interviewing); the result was a self-consciously artificial documentary film which countered viewers’ alienation or estrangement with a strong sense of immediacy as it lent its images a strong affective charge. The following decade, his work with a Norwegian public to produce *Edvard Munch* (1974) marked a new point in the development of his collaborative method, which he intensified in subsequent films. Although he later recognized that “the level of participation by the public” in it “is nowhere near as extended” as in his later work, he saw the film as a co-creative form that offered an alternative to the hegemonic media’s “hierarchical control” (Watkins 2007, 60). It is his final film, *La Commune (Paris, 1871)* (1999), that insists most forcefully to be discussed, not in terms of the film as “product,” but in terms of collaborative making as process and event: as we shall see, it called into being a mnemonic counter-public of co-creators who, as they exercised their historical imagination on individual terms, took distance from the forms of cultural authority involved in more official forms of transmitting the (national) past. In the process it reinvented relationships between medium, film-maker, participants (Watkins only ever calls them “actors” between scare quotes), and the real and imagined social spaces of their joint creative work. It arguably took to the furthest extreme, within Watkins’s trajectory, what is needed to recover the *publicness* of public television.

The early amateur film *The Forgotten Faces* (1961) helps us trace this imaginary back to its beginnings in a nexus of concerns around historical experience, news images, the influence of public media, and revolutionary action. A film about the Hungarian Uprising of 1956, it proceeds by restaging Budapest street scenes documented in *Paris Match* and *Life* magazines, in gripping photojournalism by John Sadvoy among others. *The Forgotten Faces* is thus an act of visual recall that reconstructs, realistically, testimony of inner-city conflict and its in-the-moment “feel” (Gomez 1979, 25; cf. Poggi 2015). In the process it actively participates, through the form of its remediation, in the energies it retrieves from the moments it revisits. The climactic high point comes some eight minutes into the 18-minute film, when a young revolutionary called Margit Zeke is persuaded to come on stage to read her latest article for a revolutionary gazette. Having overcome her initial reluctance, she reads her text with passion, whipping herself into a state of spirited political emotion as the assembled students and workers at her feet respond with visceral enthusiasm. We do not hear Zeke’s text (the narrator is commenting in voiceover) but the camera cuts from close-ups of her face, shouting out



her words, to individual audience members, who listen attentively and then shout in encouragement or repeat the woman's words. Arendt has spoken of the "pathos of novelty" that attends revolutionary beginnings (Arendt 1963, 27). The sequence conveys a sense of joy at the event of being together in action; in what is overall a film in a tragic mode, it affirms the dream of a revolutionary public (briefly) identical with itself, as a body of citizens freely expressing ideas in an atmosphere of passion around the act of public participation. Indeed, coming just prior to the counterrevolutionary invasion and crackdown by the Soviets, it holds out a positive image of a space of appearance in Arendt's substantive sense as a space "where freedom can unfold its charms and become a visible, tangible reality" (1963, 26).

In the only existing monograph on Watkins's work to date, the sequence is criticized for its proximity to Eisenstein's *October* (1928) on account of its overly dramatic rendering, underscored by "stirring Hungarian music" (Gomez 1979, 25). The contrast with the scenes of violence that straddle it, grimly realistic, is stark indeed—and yet the public life sequence adds something essential. From the perspective of our inquiry, it permits us to ask what happens when filmic remediation transmits the "pathos of novelty" in an encounter with other media, re-encoding the language of visual testimony to modulate its affective energy and special political charge. In this regard, I would argue that Watkins, far from idealizing the memory of revolutionary pathos in an Eisensteinian manner, actually understands it as ambivalent—as a closer consideration of the contrast with *October* might help to see. First, pace Gomez, what disables a positive comparison with Eisenstein's film—specifically its depiction of crowds and masses—is that *The Forgotten Faces* demonstrates aliveness to what Arendt calls the "condition of plurality" (Arendt 2005, 20). Rather than defining the Hungarian people in national or class terms, as a film on the model of *October* might have done, it presents them as internally variegated, as the voiceover text insists: "these are their faces," it comments on a montage of close-up portrait shots, "highly individual, with conflicting beliefs." Watkins's imaginary of publicness comes into being in such moments of disarticulation from either a national or a class-based narrative, or a combination of both. The second and still more pertinent point is that, in the context of the film as a whole, the public life sequence recognizes the limits of "pathos" as an experiential mode, in contrast with Eisenstein's affirmation of it within his famous "montage of attractions." It has recently been suggested that Watkins holds a place in a modernist tradition of the critique of pathos that includes Walter Benjamin, Herbert Marcuse—both likely influences on his media theory—and, I would add, Arendt (Duarte 2018, 26–33). Just like Benjamin, with whose critical assessment of the impoverishment of modern experience she was likely to be familiar, Arendt associated the ephemerality of pathos with a problem of modern sensibility: indeed, what may sometimes look like an idealization of the "pathos of novelty" on her part (Arendt 1963, 27) is qualified by her concern with the decline and dissipation of the political energy which she associated with foundational beginnings and with the



struggle to keep it alive beyond a generation of “founders.” The question how to sustain such energies and give them longevity is one of *On Revolution*’s most original themes. Watkins’s cinema, I argue, inscribes itself within this problematic on account of its interest not so much in intensifying “pathos” to draw viewers in, as in modulating it in order to free up affective currents that make viewers more actively attuned to the social conditions of their own lives. This is where his aesthetic of remediation might be seen to work to political effect: *The Forgotten Faces* ends by remediating a radio announcement about the Soviet invasion of Budapest to a montage of photographs of revolutionaries, many of whom lost their lives. The friction between these different layers of remediation holds out an appeal notably different from that of pathos. The effect of Watkins’s montage is to intensify involvement with the tragedy of Budapest’s freedom fighters on the one hand, while not suspending a critical stance vis-à-vis our news media on the other—working against a standardized form of reporting that would simply numb or alienate, threatening to translate the squashed revolution into spectacle. The radio broadcast is given an affective undercurrent that is politicizing insofar as it keeps a sense of involvement open: we become differently attuned, indeed.

In bringing together a thematic of revolutionary beginnings and popular-democratic energy with an aesthetic of remediation that has critical potential vis-à-vis contemporary media landscapes, *The Forgotten Faces* has many of the hallmarks of Watkins’s later work. What became increasingly prominent, after his early amateur films and subsequent short-lived career at the BBC (he fell out with them in 1965), is that his critique of the mass media, and the way they close down discussion about their own political function in society, became ever more integral to his creative practice and collaborative method. *La Commune (Paris, 1871)* is the culmination of his approach to working with publics and of the unique historical and media pedagogy which he brought to bear on many of his projects. It follows through on his words that his work is driven by a “desire to add a dimension and a process to television...: that of the public directly, seriously and in depth participating in the expressive use of the medium to examine history—past, present and future” (qtd. in Cook 2010, 231). The mostly non-professional actors were cast according to type—i.e., possible sympathizers with the Commune were cast as *communards*, more critical participants as *bourgeois*—but, importantly, not to simply confirm them in a given political identification. The burden of research and on-set improvisation—the more than 200 participants all developed their own characters and wrote or improvised their lines—pushed them through an experience in which they could come into their own as political subjects. There are two points to make about this process. First, it is intriguing how the formation of a mnemonic counter-public on the set worked together with what happens in the film’s diegesis, simultaneously mirroring it and lending it affective resonance, in a way not uncommon to the embodied, performative practices of bringing the past “alive” that go by the name of historical re-enactment (cf. Agnew 2007). In narrative terms, the film traces the story

of the Paris Commune from its hopeful beginning in March 1871 to its tragic ending two months later, when the experiment in municipal self-government was brought to a halt by a violent crackdown on the part of the national government under Adolphe Thiers. The creation of a counter-public is explicitly thematized since, anachronistically, the narrative folds the foundation of a *communard* news channel into its historical exploration of the dynamics of political action and constituent power inside the Commune context.<sup>2</sup> The effect equals that of the mixed temporalities in *Culloden*: pitting the foundation of a rival channel, “TV Communale,” against the government’s “TV Nationale,” broadcast from Versailles, Watkins’s attention to the role of media in forming publics—in calling them into being and imaginatively sustaining them—prevents the conceit of an objective world of representation with its illusions of immediacy and historical veracity. This is enhanced by the use of a “vox pop” mode of reporting, with the actor-participants speaking directly into the camera, breaking with the fourth wall and making contact with the viewer. Watkins’s “communal” public life imaginary would thus seem to have been realized on a formal level.

But the second point concerns the way that this representational structure, experimental and innovative as it is, is ruptured and further transformed by developments that unfolded unexpectedly on the set. The “mass audiovisual media,” Watkins has written, “have gone to immense lengths to deny people any meaningful participation in the creation of TV as a truly public medium” (Watkins 2007, 60). At a certain point, participants started to relate in this very spirit to the project underway, “criticiz[ing] Watkins’s employment of [the vox pop] reporting style” insofar as it homogenized their voices and put constraints on self-representation; it was even objected that it might work “as a new version of the monoforum”—Watkins’s term of denunciation for the standardized audiovisual formats that dominate most television making (Ramos-Martínez 2016, 213; cf. Cook 2010). We see this friction enter into the diegesis where the “vox pop” mode breaks down and gives way to direct, indeed unmediated debate among the re-enactors—still in costume, but stepping out of character—about the meaning of the Commune today and about the modern media landscape and how it manipulates historical knowledge and understanding. As a thorough-going interruption of the field of representation that takes Watkins’s “communal” imaginary further than he had foreseen, it is a high point of the film—which, in its original version, is much the longer for it at close to six hours. The group discussions make for highly touching, affectively charged scenes. They include a discussion among female re-enactors who chose to separate themselves out as a group to debate their involvement. One of them turns to the question of the distribution of the film, for which she feels a sense of responsibility or care: “What about the distribution of a work like this? ... This experience is full of hope, and in that sense, extremely positive. We should distribute not only the film, but also the life that took place around it.” It is an interesting comment on the fragility of this kind of creative

process precisely as an action context whose energy is realized to have significance beyond the film as product: it is understood to hold out the promise of a truly democratic public world, inhabitable on more inclusive terms.

My interest is in the role of mnemonic and affective resonances within this experiential reorientation. Speaking with Lauren Berlant, we might call the special counter-public sphere that took shape on the set an “affect world,” defined by attachment to public life as much as by public argument and debate (Berlant 2011, 226). In terms of the precise emotional and affective qualities attending the experience, we might also approach the film by way of historian Enzo Traverso’s notion of “left-wing melancholy”: a term delineating an emotional and temporal structure that is essentially ambivalent, as it links political mourning, or an elegiac sense of public loss, to a prolongation—no matter how weakened—of utopian aspiration (Traverso 2016). As the spirit of the Commune itself suffuses or runs through the discussion scenes within the film, the latter aspect is especially pertinent. Kristin Ross, in a recent book on the Commune, speaks of the event’s own “expanded temporality” as projected from within the initial experience, resulting in “a kind of afterlife that does not exactly *come after* but ... is part and parcel of the event itself”; indeed, in her words, its “*prolongation*” is “every bit as vital to the event’s logic as the initial acts of insurrection in the streets of the city” (Ross 2015, 6; italics in the original).

Considering the complex emotional, affective, and temporal structures of *La Commune*, it is all the more appropriate that Geoff Bowie’s documentary film about its making, *The Universal Clock: The Resistance of Peter Watkins* (Bowie, 2001), should pay ample attention to the experiences and subjectivities of the re-enactors. Some five of them are interviewed at length, against a background of moving images of them pre-shot in their domestic surroundings. A central theme is that of the unique experience of being included in a form of public television making that would otherwise seem to them to be marked by exclusivity. One interviewee, a social worker, recounts her surprise at being included despite “being fat”; her excitement at taking part resonates with that of others, who all comment on the element of “*prise de parole*”—literally, the capture of speech—afforded by the project. Kamel, a *sans papier* from a Parisian *banlieu* who features among the Algerian (Kabyle) community depicted in the film, eloquently relates the story of how his involvement, most especially the experience of researching his lines, made available to him a chance “to reinhabit [him]self”: the fight to retain an inner life, to (re)gain a positive experience of his own subjectivity, being at the heart of the predicament of statelessness as he narrates it. Footage of Watkins talking to other participant-actors—instructing them, consulting with them—resonates with this undocumented man’s reflections: the director’s insistence is that the participants speak as and on behalf of themselves (“*c’est vous!*”), not through an approach of their role as belonging to a character somehow outside or other than themselves. The adoption of a historical persona here functions, I propose, in the spirit of Arendt’s retrieval of the theatrical origins of the word

“persona,” which originally, in ancient drama, referred to the use of masks to “make it possible for the voice to sound through,” offering a mode of appearance which, while hiding the actor’s countenance, at the same time makes individuation possible (Arendt 1963, 102). The perspective on the relationship between theatricality and political action that we find here helps gauge the special experience and mode of inhabiting publicness that Watkins’s method made available.

For contrast, let us recall that the dominant critical paradigm that has informed the discussion of his film so far is Brechtian, emphasizing *La Commune*’s political significance in terms of its didacticism and the way it offered participants “a lesson in collectivity” (Koutsourakis 2018, 181).<sup>3</sup> The Arendtian discussion that has been attempted here, while not at odds with the Brechtian paradigm, might go further in highlighting the potential of Watkins’s method to stimulate forms or modalities of political individuation insofar as it offers spaces of experience that are radically open. In this perspective, Watkins is not so much a “community filmmaker” (Cook 2010, 227) as, to borrow Stuart Hall’s words about the artist Jeremy Deller—another experimenter with historical re-enactment techniques, whose affinity with Watkins is stark—a “*metteur-en-scène*” who “constructs environments” as well as films or artworks (Hall 2012, 82). For Watkins, not film but the public itself is the medium of his art.

#### 8.4 IMAGINARIES OF PUBLICNESS: NOTES TOWARD A CONCEPT

One of the larger aims of this discussion has been to explore the value of notions of “attachment” and “attunement” in understanding how a sense of publicness—a strong sense of inhabiting a “common public world” (Arendt 1998, 257)—might be sustained and transmitted over time. I have not primarily been concerned here with recruiting Watkins’s method as a model for “doing” public humanities; nor has it been my aim to simply establish the applicability of an Arendtian framework to the director’s practice. Producing models seems less appropriate than interrogating the case to obtain a larger sense of possibility, and to bolster a self-critical stance that might help public humanities projects keep their distance from the impulse, observed in some institutional contexts, to assimilate them to “civic education” or “service learning” paradigms that would seem to take inherited notions of cultural authority and indeed of publicness itself all too easily for granted (as when they reproduce these notions through their practices while failing to contest, or even be concerned with, the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion they may tacitly entail; cf. Mullen 2016). Indeed, if there is one thing the public humanities might learn from Watkins’s work, it is that there are forms and practices of aesthetico-political engagement and education that may unfold in public culture while keeping radically open the conception of publicness itself, as well as related notions of community, citizenship, and belonging. We

recall that the modalities of experience that have been traced here are not, in my reading, prescribed or “scripted” in any way. Watkins’s practice works by creating spaces in which they may emerge from the bottom up, allowing participants to find ways to (re)inhabit public space—and themselves as political subjects—on terms of their own making. If *La Commune (Paris, 1871)*, qua artistic process, offered a space for participants to “appear,” it did so by using historical imagination as a medium for performative co-creation.

With the above proviso in mind, and insisting that no logic of exemplarity is intended, let me attempt to theorize a concept of “imaginaries of publicness” which, while building on the discussion of Watkins’s film, might have wider resonance in the current juncture—one in which public spheres are shrinking or being eviscerated under pressures of various kinds, whether we understand these as neoliberal, illiberal and authoritarian, post-political, or as a mix of all of these. A first attempt to develop the concept of public life imaginaries, as distinct from national and other imaginaries that typically foreclose their notions of community, would need to include at least the following three points. To begin with, it seems vital to associate them with an idea of publics as essentially, irreducibly plural and heterogeneous in character. Watkins’s work, as we have seen, pushes against a homogenizing treatment of publics, assemblies, and crowds that would unite them around a figure other (or larger) than itself. There is a dynamic at work that shows human groupings break into stubborn particularities, into individual parts that may relate across sometimes ineradicable differences within the same political or social space. Insofar as there are moments of totalization, they are overcome or suspended—reconfigured on account of the dynamics of publics’ self-constitution as an open-ended and reflexive process. Second, no conceptualization of public life imaginaries would seem complete without the notion that they affirm the “world-making” capacity of publics, understood in terms of their potential for transformation of the spaces of encounter in which they appear. Following Warner, but extending his approach to publics as a “cultural form” in a political direction, the point would seem open to exploration in meta-pragmatic terms, for not only is a new experience of public life made available, an understanding of publics’ world-making powers is transmitted to audiences and viewers in ways that might be traced through the modes of address that are being used (cf. Warner 2002, 16). In Arendtian terms, additionally, we might also (re)describe this “world-making” power in terms of an expanded sense of political action, with creative and artistic practice folded into it; the idea is that action contexts are strengthened and prolonged by the poietic powers which are brought to bear as (counter-)publics come together to act in concert. Third, to the extent that imaginaries of the kind under discussion are invested in a pluralistic understanding of human uniqueness and diversity, they are theatrical in an elemental sense; more precisely, they acknowledge the aspect of theatricality that is integral to every mode of appearing in public. This applies not only on the representational level of the films I have discussed here; in Watkins’s

case the point is equally pertinent to the method deployed in enabling participants' *prise de parole* as political subjects—using historical imagination and re-enactment in the fashioning of a “persona” that permits “the voice to sound through” (Arendt 1963, 102).

What emerges, then, is a view of publics as essentially plural, as “world-making” in an enlarged and capacious sense, and as making their appearance through forms of staging and self-staging (*mise-en-scène*) that must be seen as constitutive of political life, with theatricality understood not just as an expressive mode but as a medium of publicness in its own right: in each of these regards, the public life imaginaries whose concept I aim to delineate work under the signs of openness, fluidity, and *autopoiesis* or self-making. But this is to say that there is an underlying ontological orientation that renders publics the sign or figure of their own putative “ground.” After all, what do these different characteristics point to, if not to the groundlessness of the political itself—the fact that no “ground” of authority is naturally “given” but that it needs to be asserted, indeed re-grounded, time and again, in an incessant movement of grounding and ungrounding (cf. Marchart 2007)? This necessitates a further three points which are complex and thus deserve to be developed at more length. The first of them is that it seems essential that imaginaries of publicness attend to the *constitutive* role of publics in founding the political, and that in doing so, they confirm it. In Arendtian terms, publics’ capacity for action is associated with constituent, not constituted power. On the representational level, we may see this at work whenever publics, crowds, audiences, or assemblies can be seen to exercise power or collective agency of some elemental kind—typically seized in the moment, no matter how episodic or fleeting,—in a way that pits this power or agency against formal or symbolic structures of rule. In *La Commune*, we see this most typically in moments of contestation where the people take control of “public things,” such as the cannons of Montmartre or the *Hôtel de ville de Paris*. As members of the public they do not, however, lose their individuality: even the “vox pop” reporting mode in Watkins’s film does not homogenize the public into a crowd or mob or into a collective protagonist of some kind. As the film’s crowds and publics are entered by a hand-held camera—a “participant” camera, indeed (Gomez 1979, 23)—the dynamic of breaking the public up into individual elements continues even in the action scenes (cf. Ramos-Martínez 2016).

Second, it is important to specify the kinds of collective identification which public life imaginaries might encourage or enable. I would argue that in an ideal sense, imaginaries of publicness have the capacity to make publics identify, not so much with a putative “ground” of the community—e.g., an idea of the nation or the *ethnos*—as with the very processes of debate and politico-historical contestation through which a community perpetually (re)constitutes itself. Such identification is ultimately focused on the never-ending movement of (de)constitution itself—a movement in which history is grasped in its contingency, in which a sense of agency is expanded, and in which conflict and dissensus might be given a place. The point is not as abstract or remote

from practical concerns as it may sound. Agonistic political theory has long recognized the importance of democratic forms of imagination in staving off “political closure,” and in keeping spaces of discussion open in ways that recognize conflictuality as integral to democratic life (Keenan 2003). In the study of public memory, too, the possibility is well understood that such cultural and imaginative forms have the capacity to strengthen a democratic ethos, insofar as they help create “environment[s] in which competing claims can be channeled away from the possibility of violence and into democratic structures robust and flexible enough to accommodate ineliminable political contestation” (Bell 2008, 159). What a democratic culture requires are forms of identification that are resolutely non- or anti-identitarian and have the capacity to focus the imagination on the democratic process itself.

The third and final point is that such forms of identification go together with forms and dynamics of transmission that have their own distinct temporal structures and modes of historical awareness. With regard to temporal structures, we might take our cue from Warner’s observation that publics and counter-publics “act historically according to the temporality of their circulation” (2002, 96). They are temporalities that are shaped by the media, yet in ways that are open to creative intervention and change. The distance that Watkins keeps from the rhythms and standardized formats of the “monoform” illustrates how there might be a time of and for counter-publics that is shaped around their own needs of participation and expression; we have seen how his final film opened itself up—also time-wise—to debate. The issue of historical awareness is a broader one, and I want to link it to the question that was raised earlier about the dynamics of transmission of “positive attachments.” Ann Rigney writes that “[r]emembering the past, shaping the future remembrance of the present, and struggles for a better future feed into each other in ways that still need unpacking along with the distinctive cultural forms and practices that are used in the transmission of civic commitment” (2018, 372). The public humanities, like the field of memory studies, would do well to pay heed to such a call, and I suggest that attending to imaginaries of publicness might be integral to this pursuit. Watkins himself seemed aware that the historical sense associated with the experience of publicness is multi-directional when he wrote in 1977: “I believe that we are all history, past, present, future, all participating in a common sharing and sensing of experiences which flow about us, forwards and backwards, sometimes simultaneously, without limitations from time or space” (qtd. in Gomez 1979, 125). His work holds out a form in which such flows of experience might be felt the more intensely.



## NOTES

1. Watkins's most important publication as media critic is an often reworked treatise called *Media Crisis*. The latest English version is available from his website (<http://pwatkins.mnsi.net/>). In book form it is available in a French translation by Patrick Watkins, maintaining the same (English) title (Watkins 2015).
2. I use the term “counter-public” here in Warner’s sense as when “a dominated group aspires to re-create itself as a public and in doing so finds itself in conflict not only with the dominant social group but with the norms that constitute the dominant culture as a public” (Warner 2002, 112).
3. Assessments of Watkins’s (qualified) Brechtianism are many and diverse. Some scholars have argued, in classic Brechtian terms, that *La Commune* approximates a didactic “*Lehrstück*” in cinema (Jovanovic 2017, 155–66; Koutsourakis 2018, 178–82); others assimilate the film, again through Brecht, to postcolonial “Third Cinema” with its organization of the narrative around a collective protagonist in its fight against an oppressive, typically colonial power (Wayne 2002; Cook 2010).

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