

(Re-)Shaping the Public Sphere: Cultural Productions as/and Interventions: The 2024 Postgraduate Forum

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In recent years, conservative campaigns have increasingly instrumentalized cultural institutions and productions for political purposes in ways that are visible to the public. The latest wave of book bans has gathered momentum since 2021 (Mazariegos; Goldberg) and demonstrates how activist groups like Moms for Liberty and conservative politicians use cultural censorship as a tool for their ideological agendas. Texas, Virginia, South Carolina, Florida, and other states have removed sections from school curricula aimed at providing democratic representation of marginalized communities (Harris and Alter). The “Parental Rights in Education” (the so-called “Don’t Say Gay Bill”) and other laws ban classroom discussions on gender identity and sexual orientation in the state of Florida and encroach upon US-American democracy by limiting freedom of speech. Although literary organizations, like the Authors Guild or PEN America, authors, parents, and publishers have legally challenged a renewed wave of book bans in 2025, highlighting the need for constitutional safeguards against restrictions to free speech, the removal of books from libraries and schools continues (Empson). While the book bans show how public discussions influence the production and circulation of literature, it also illustrates the social impact and power that texts yield to disrupt, question, and strengthen public discourses.

With the topic of “(Re-)Shaping the Public Sphere: Cultural Productions as/and Interventions” we wanted to inspire contemplation on and investigation into the role of the public sphere as a cornerstone of democratic societies, and the cultural productions constituting it. We understand cultural productions as ranging from rather traditional creations like literary texts, to paintings or movies, to social media posts and newspaper articles. All are vital to fostering discursive practices and forming public opinion, both through their content and their societal reception and criticism. “Cultural production” as a term broadens the scope of the discussion beyond the conventional cultural studies analysis, which focuses on the artifact and its representative potential, to include a sociological perspective and consider the contexts of production, distribution, and reception as essential processes occurring in relation to the public sphere.

The contributions in this issue explore these relations and stem from paper presentations and peer discussions prompted by the 34th annual conference of the Postgraduate Forum (PGF) of the German Association for American Studies (GAAS/DGfA). The conference took place from November 21-23, 2024, at the Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg (FAU)

and was organized by us as members of the research training group *Literature and the Public Sphere in Differentiated Contemporary Cultures* at FAU.

Over 50 participants attended the 2024 hybrid conference, mostly in person. Speakers from 13 different universities in Germany discussed their respective research projects and offered new perspectives on the role cultural productions play in shaping the public sphere. Participants examined the intersections of aesthetics, changing cultural contexts of production, distribution, and reception of US-American literature and other forms of cultural productions, such as museum installations, movies, and talk shows, since 1945 in an increasingly fragmented public sphere.

The program included a poetry slam workshop that addressed the marginalization of queer authors in the public sphere, and a workshop which enabled discussions about the positioning and hurdles of early career scholars in the academic public. Lena Gotteswinter's keynote speech "'Invisible' and Public Hipsters: (Re-)Claiming Hip through Performance" traced the historical development of the hipster figure and its racial implications and resonance in the contemporary public sphere of the US.

In seven panels, speakers discussed the different ways in which cultural productions intervene into dominant narratives and power structures, as well as how those structures in turn shape the public appearance of cultural productions. Thematically, panels included a range of topics: "Female Activism in and through Text," "The Institutional Lens," "Public Discourses on Blackness," "Queering Publics," "Visual Media: Audience Interaction and Reception," "Cultural Productions and Politics," and "Cultural Productions and Identity Formation."

Participants exchanged ideas and engaged in discussions long after panels, during coffee breaks, and during the social events, proving the importance of the PGF conference as a forum for exchange among early researchers.

The US-American Public Sphere

In light of the increasingly polarized political climate in the US, the cultural field plays an important role in (re)shaping discourses on e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, topics often targeted by conservative-driven book bans.¹ We assume that cultural productions have the power to intervene in dominant public discourses, to create counterpublics, to express alternate ways of knowing, and to assert a right to difference. They, therefore, prove to be powerful agents that reflect American societal values while also actively intervening in and reshaping public debate, potentially revolutionizing the relationship between power and access.

¹ We use Pierre Bourdieu's field vocabulary to specify that the often vaguely used concept of "culture" can be analyzed as a concrete network of agents, processes, and structural logics.

Cultural creations, such as novels, have become a vehicle for carrying out political conflicts in the US and this issue examines the agency and formation of American cultural productions within the national and transnational public sphere. We seek to shed light on the conditions enabling and restraining cultural production, distribution, and reception, while acknowledging the agency of these productions to function as interventions into public discourses and structures.

The connection between the cultural and the public has been addressed in theories of the public sphere to varying degrees. In his seminal work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Jürgen Habermas analyzes the emergence of a bourgeois public sphere in 18th-century Europe, where citizens engage in public deliberation to reach a consensus.² Cultural institutions like literary salons and newspapers were instrumental to this objective as they provided a space for rational debate (Habermas 89-104). Habermas' model, however, has been heavily criticized on multiple levels. Nancy Fraser claims that his deliberations disregard the limited access subordinated social groups, including women, working-class people, People of Color, and the queer community, have to public expression (67). To resist the exclusionary mechanisms of the dominant public and form communities of solidarity, these marginalized groups have created "subaltern counterpublics" as discursive spaces, enabling them to circulate counter discourses that respect their perspectives and identities (Fraser 67). In contrast to Habermas' idealized single public sphere, Fraser maps out a public sphere defined by multiplicity, dominance, and exclusion, a conceptualization we also adopt in this issue. Her understanding of the public sphere as a space of multiple publics therefore draws attention to the social impact generated by the cultural output of and for these marginalized groups, like the female fan life narratives Catherine Faith Gastin dissects, the feminist autofiction Lujain Youssef examines, or queer TV series like *Dickinson* that Susen Halank discusses.

With a heightened focus on the role texts—understood in a broad sense that includes any kind of circulated discourse—play in the formation of the public sphere, Michael Warner further emphasizes the dynamic process of public formation through the media. According to Warner, a public is a temporary creation that comes into existence through address (67). Therefore, Warner understands publics not as static institutions but as performed and transient spaces, whose existence depends on speech acts as they are constituted in cultural productions (67-74). Nina Wintermeyer's article on feminist publishing strategies also ties to this notion of active public formation through a collective of texts, and she analyzes how feminist publishing strategies contribute to the creation of publics in different ways.

With technological advances extending the public sphere into the digital realm, scholars aim to capture the effects of these developments on public discussions and democracy in general. Opinions range from seeing the digitization of public debate as a threat to public opinion formation (see, for example, Habermas, *Neuer Strukturwandel*, 45-67) to embracing the new

² For the German original, see *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (1962).

possibilities of access to public discussion as a way to strengthen democratic practices (see, for example, Benkler 2; Papacharissi 112-25). Kshitij Pipaleshwar's paper illustrates the point of the latter by showing how a TV show, such as *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, can encourage audience members to become politically active and thereby foster democratic participation. The cancellation of *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* and the suspension of *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* in 2025 demonstrate the value of TV programming that engages in political debate and criticism for democratic opinion formation. The articles in this issue show that cultural products are publicly resonating agents, carrying a diverse range of discourses and narratives into public debate and therefore have to be considered an essential part of any public sphere.

Cultural productions, like literature, media, and art, occupy a steady presence amid the structural transformations of the public sphere. In *Literatur und mediale Öffentlichkeiten* (2025), Antje Kley and Aida Bosch succinctly summarize the various functions that literature can perform in relation to the public sphere, some of which can also be extended to cultural productions more broadly. Literary texts, as much as movies or series, operate with an aesthetic form that provides discursive avenues and highlights the evolution of economic, cultural, and social contexts. From the interaction between recipient and medium, affective and critical receptions emerge that contribute to deliberative public exchanges. Cultural productions serve as repositories of cultural memory, preserving and shaping collective identities and ideologies. Even more, their reconstruction of history actively influences how we understand the present and envision the future. Additionally, the deliberative practices enabled via reception and critical approaches to cultural productions foster a democratic sensibility rooted in both listening and dialogue (Bosch and Kley 14-15).

The papers included in this issue all address the relation between the public sphere and different forms of cultural productions shaping it. They mainly rely on an understanding of the public sphere as a space of plurality and affirmation, as well as of restricted access and contestation. They offer case studies that illustrate the relation between the public sphere and cultural productions in different ways and contexts and highlight the specific powers yielded by series, social media posts, literary fiction and non-fiction, as well as the infrastructures enabling their public circulation, thereby offering concrete examples of the intersection between cultural output and the public sphere.

COPAS 26.1 at a Glance

Susen Halank's "A Curious Creature?: Emily Dickinson and/in Popular Culture" analyzes the Apple TV series *Dickinson* and its potential to introduce the scholarly discourse on Emily Dickinson into the public sphere. She notes that the series forgoes historical accuracy to some degree, in part to rewrite Dickinson's life in accordance with feminist scholarship and to depict Dickinson as a strong queer character that modern audiences can identify with. Halank argues that the series consequently overcomes the restrictions of the biopic genre and becomes part

of a counterpublic sphere, revealing its ability to provoke and irritate as well as its potential to inspire change and resistance against mainstream heteronormative society.

Lujain Youssef's "Autofiction as a Site of Resistance: Reclaiming Agency in Contemporary Women's Writing" focuses on the affective charge in texts and the specific role it takes in autofiction. In her first case study, Youssef argues that *I Love Dick* by Chris Kraus (1997) deliberately disrupts the public/private binary and questions the distinction of fact and fiction. Similarly, she asserts that *Dept. of Speculation* (2014) by Jenny Offill emphasizes how private matters are inseparable from public and global contexts through literary fragmentation.

Catherine Faith Gastin's "Home on the Road: Women, Mobility, and Space in Van Life" discusses the concept of van life and situates contemporary van life narratives within the framework of Doreen Massey's work on space, gender, and representations of the road in literature. Gastin argues that contemporary narratives created by and about solo female van life travelers challenge and reimagine the existing representations of American roads and travel as masculine and suggest a more gender inclusive landscape. She further claims that these representations of solo female van life travelers break with traditional representations of the home and domestic space, placing them in the public sphere as active participants on the road.

Kshitij Pipaleshwar's "A Decade of *The Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* – Its Success and Participatory Approach to Social Change" discusses how the TV show *The Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* employs strategies of social engagement and encourages active participation from its audience. Pipaleshwar argues that by using specific strategies, accompanied by intrinsic and extrinsic factors that help the show find its footing and popularity, it is able to make a tangible impact, initiating participation in the public sphere and visible social change.

Nina Wintermeyer's article "Engagement or Retreat: On Women's Publishing and Making a Public" conceptualizes contemporary practices in women's publishing as situated on a scale between, on the one hand, an active engagement with the public sphere, and a deliberate retreat from it on the other hand. Outlining how female publishers and writers have carved out a space of legitimacy for women in the market and public sphere tied to the publishing field, the paper contextualizes the two publishing strategies within this historical trajectory and investigates their activist powers.

Anna Ley's "How Frank Underwood Paved the Way for Donald Trump. Transmedia (De-) Construction of Civil Religious Narratives in (Fictional) American Politics" examines how fictional presidential narratives become part of the historical imagination by utilizing American civil religious elements such as presidential portraits to blur the boundaries between fact and fiction. By highlighting the interplay between fact and fiction, Ley argues that the TV series *House of Cards* changes and shapes the public's interpretation of institutionalized accounts of the American presidency, while also focusing on the use of presidential portraits as stylistic devices.

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We are looking forward to this year's PGF conference organized by Team Leipzig that will

address the timely issue of *Crisis and Resilience in American Literature, Culture, History, and Politics* from November 6-8, 2025. We thank all the team members for their commitment to continuing the annual conference series, and we are eager to participate in the enriching discussions that the event will spark.

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