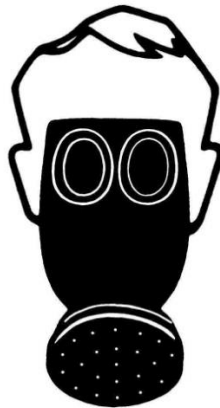


Culture in danger?...if only

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THE MOVEMENT OF CULTURAL 'INTERMITTENTS'. FRANCE, 2003-4



The following text is an English version of a text written in France following the strikes and actions of 'Les intermittents du spectacle' (casualised workers in the culture industry) in June and July 2003. It is different from the French version, dropping things that have been mentioned in the article '[Tentative impressionistic notes on the movements in France, June 2003](#)', and adding a couple of things to inform English readers of things too well-known to be worth mentioning to French readers, and also including some more developed analysis which had to be dropped from the French version for lack of space.

The slogan 'Culture In Danger' is the dominant slogan of the movement of intermittents'.

The 'intermittents' were basically seasonal workers, officially out of work for large periods of the year. They were fighting against a change in France's laws that allowed them to draw a large percentage of their income even when they weren't officially working (though often they were, but being paid a pittance). Most 'intermittents' are stage hands and theatre technicians, though it includes small time actors, musicians, etc.

“This little army threatened to burn all the theatres if they did not close immediately, saying that the French people had no right to enjoy themselves in the midst of public misfortunes and that they no longer had any reason to amuse themselves. All theatres were duly closed; moreover no actor would have the courage to appear on the stage in the midst of the general alarm inspired by the certain prospect of tragic events.”

- Professor Bellfroy, Paris, July 12th 1789.

Last June and July (2003) the intermittents ' launched the best practical critique of modern culture for a long time - by shutting down festivals that have been going on since shortly after the Second World War. As insurrectionaries discovered over 200 years ago, truly enjoying and amusing ourselves involves also attacking the official market-enforced and State-protected forms of enjoyment and amusement, the *representations* (but not the reality) of life. These representations are the essence of culture so it's ironic that the intermittents ' should dress themselves up in the same language as the State and the market - accusing the *State* of putting culture in danger', pre-empting the inevitable accusation the government launched against them. Predictably, the appeal to culture ' was turned against the strikers, the government accusing *them* of holding culture hostage. It's a measure of the success of the dominant ideology of culture', that those at the obvious sharp end of culture - shit-paid and casualised - can somehow believe that they can develop their struggle by appealing to the correct terminology defined by this society that humiliates them without end. And yet, when the intermittents went on strike, it was *them* that put culture, or some aspects of it, in danger. And their inventive creativity in struggle began to prove the fundamental poverty of everything that likes to dress itself up as culture'. The attempts to stop the utterly boring Tour de France or the grotesquely embarrassing performances of the decomposed geriatrics of rock n' roll - Johnny Halliday and the Rolling Stones^[1] - were far more interesting than any of these spectacles where the spectators have to know their place (the same goes for the successful stoppage of the Avignon festival and other festivals this summer).

PROGRESS OF A SUBVERSIVE COMMUNICATION

The progress of a subversive communication is far more revealing than any entertainment. For example, in Montpellier, at the Opéra in June, intermittents' on strike went into the theatre at the end of the performance and lay down all over the stairs and foyer, forcing the spectators to step over them. They then occupied the Opera until they were kicked out and beaten a few hours later by the CRS. This somewhat unoriginal and masochistic action was initiated by the CGT, who, at a General Assembly of intermittents' a few hundred metres from the Opéra, had insisted that the Assembly be exclusive solely to intermittents' and that it could not take any practical decisions. But the week after, under the initiation of some intermittents' critical of the CGT, some open public assemblies - to which anyone interested was welcome - were held over three evenings, discussing tactics and ideas, and on the fourth evening they invaded the Corum just before the show and closed it down, a subversion of the cultural spectacle, and of its innate division between paying spectators and paid performers, that, ironically, the intermittents' *ideology* (or, at least *some* of it) claimed to defend. The Socialist mayor - Fréche^[2] - showed more awareness of the subversive nature of this creative communication than the intermittents' themselves, hysterically threatening to immediately sack them, then backing off when he realised that this was not legal (yet) but promising to refuse to renew their contracts. So much for the hypocritical sympathy for the various strike movements on the part of the Socialist Party, a hypocrisy so obvious it's almost banal to point it out: as long as these movements don't challenge *its* sphere of power it'll support' them.^[3]

The trouble with the Culture in Danger' slogan is that it's a slogan which neither side - neither the bosses nor the intermittents' - really believes in. In expressing themselves within the confines of this slogan, the intermittents' concede to their enemies the right to define the parameters of what constitutes reasonable debate. Above all, it's a concession to their enemies' *mentality*, the traditional politician mentality, the mentality of arguing what you don't really believe in, courting a passively approving popularity for fear of telling the truth as you see it. Most intermittents' know full well that culture isn't in danger, but they wish to appeal to the common ground of the language of *this* society, the language of lies. It's a slogan that unites exploiting bosses with exploited workers, union bureaucrats with those they manipulate, the language of false unity hiding basic antagonisms.

The only culture that's worth developing and is genuinely in danger is the culture of resistance that France has exemplified on and off for the last 200 years or more. The contradiction is that the striking intermittents' are far more part of this culture than they are of the culture' they claim

to want to save. Those who put out this slogan know full well that Culture' in the sense of artistic representations is certainly *not* in danger, though, infinitely more importantly, the means of survival of the intermittents' *are* in danger through the government's project of reducing the length of time they could claim earnings-related State benefits. Those justly struggling to maintain a certain level of survival and security feel they need to appeal to a higher authority - culture' - in order to make their struggle greater than it is. But in appealing to culture they make it *less* than it is; that is, they hide the real significance of this exciting movement behind a pointless abstraction.

The intermittents' are now at the heart of the fundamental contradiction of the French proletariat^[4]: producing this society yet revolting against it. This is a struggle of the more modern proletariat against an attack on its margin of freedom and survival by modern capital under the temporary direction of this government. To appeal to culture' is to appeal to a special role in this society and stops people recognising that these attacks are an attack not just on their particular mode of alienated labour but part of the attacks French capital has to make on the *whole* of the French working class to make Europe competitive.

The State doesn't want culture to disappear -

on the contrary,

the worse things get, the more culture is essential

for the maintenance of this mad society.

What they want is to push it more into the private sector, make it more profitable, reduce subsidies.

THE END OF SUBSIDIES?

What will happen is the intensified free market in culture - for example, maybe an end to State

subsidised free music festivals held throughout the country in the summer. As a method of channelling those who consider themselves most rebellious into exciting ' wage labour, the subsidised cultural spectacles have sometimes been a bit inventive, but most of that spectacular inventiveness which comes from a fairly marginal and partly precarious means of survival will either be repressed, not by State censorship, but by the censorship the Economy imposes on daily communication or be more crudely co-opted - into advertising, for instance, as it always has in the past.

One can see the use of subsidised arts as a means of pacification in the development of the Welfare State in the USA., brought about partly by the massive eruption of strikes and riots during the Great Depression. The New Deal in the 30s gave federal money to put thousands of writers, artists, actors and musicians to work - in a Federal Theatre Project, a Federal Writers Project, a Federal Art Project; pretty murals were painted on public buildings, hiding the ugliness of the social relations inside and out; plays were put on for working-class audiences who had never seen a proper ' play; people heard a live symphony for the first time, etc. Giving the dangerous unwashed workers a whiff of High Culture is such a civilising influence, don't you think? But in 1939, with the organisation of capital more stable and less threatened by class struggle, the New Deal reform impulse became less necessary, so programs to subsidise the arts were eliminated. It had been useful for the development of capital to first of all subsidise culture (just as nowadays some states subsidise the starting up of new businesses for the previously unemployed) and then leave these artists to sink or swim in the market. All this has some parallels with France today.

Certainly subsidies allow a margin of experimentation *within* the creation of theatrical forms of entertainment which the free market' does not *immediately visibly* allow because the free market' is based on immediate popularity - immediate mass demand to develop immediate short-term profit. It has to appeal to the lowest common denominator of predictable mass taste - taste which has already been moulded and conditioned by cultural spectacles which are immediately easy to understand, easy to consume, bland exchangeable equivalents. The withering away of subsidies *seems*, according to Statist-orientated social democratic logic, to mean the development of a solely monolithic culture: certain desires will never get co-opted into forms of commodified representation, because, apparently, the private sector, being concerned only with short-term profit, won't invest in the search for such original' desires. In fact, the culture industry is aware that experimentation (within the confines of saleability) is essential for the creation of novelties needed to pacify an increasingly jaded public. They don't need the State to invest, through subsidies, a small amount of its surplus in such risky experimentation; they'll do it privately^[5].

Moreover, the pressures of the Economy anyway create spontaneously' tens of thousands of would-be writers and/or artists anxious to make money by putting their uniquely subjective fantasies down on paper, canvas or whatever, fiction which is then picked up by prowling market researchers who then transform them into more mass market entertainment and/or advertising.

COMPARISONS WITH THE U.K.

In fact, contrary to the official ideology put out by most intermittents', intensified commodification of culture does not mean the end of its diversity: as we have experienced in the UK, the more a varied free life is repressed, the more the free market in culture steps in to represent the vast variety of desires for sensation numbed by the totalitarian economy.

(This is also mirrored in the development of theatrical forms of opposition', spectacular protest, in the UK, where effective forms of opposition have been virtually non-existent since the Poll Tax riots of 1990. There, the repression of direct anger has meant a vast growth in completely useless, but original', forms of opposition' - for example, the recently televised protest of a guy who's paid peanuts by the State, *crawling* - significantly - on all fours pushing a peanut along the London streets with his nose, surrounded by endless amounts of journalists and cameramen).

The differences in cultural content between the UK and France mirror the margin of freedom in the respective countries (though the climate also plays a part). The UK is full of the most crudely provocative art deliberately intended to break through the ever thickening anaesthetised skin of the average art lover, the average spectator. In France, where continued but limited intransigence on the part of the proletariat means that there's generally a better quality of living and margin of freedom to rebel, culture represents a light-hearted rebellion more. Either this movement will be defeated and this light-heartedness will go or creativity in the attack on normal daily life will blossom and make culture be recognised as the closed window onto a vicarious external life that it is. Or possibly something else - an explosion of violent class struggle, with culture chasing on its heels and producing angry' cinema, music etc.

ALL WORK PRODUCES ALIENATION

Wherever people sell their labour, whether it *seems* a rebellious way of making money or not, there is the commodity and pretending that somehow your work is different is just one of the

ways this society divides and rules. That intermittents' have, up till now, accepted pitiful wages - sometimes working for 15 euros a day in the black economy in order to be re-employed at the end of what is officially their year off - is in part due to the ideology of creativity that their work is imbued with. The reason many bosses have supported the strikes is not just down to the fact that they may be forced to make up the difference in the income of the intermittents resulting from the proposed shortening of earnings-related unemployment pay, which subsidises the cultural black economy, but also because there 's a limit to how much the consolation of creativity' can compensate for crap wages.

All work produces alienation. Although everyone needs to find some margin of dignity in their alienated labour, and, although, obviously, there are increasing amounts of people who are forced, by the need for money (the only need the Economy produces), to work producing cultural commodities, through selling their drawing skills, their musical skills, their set-design abilities or whatever, to have illusions that somehow your work is special merely contributes to a hierarchical superior attitude towards other wage labourers and stops you recognising that all this creativity' creates something you are forced to *submit* to.

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A BRIEF HISTORY OF CULTURE

Under capitalism, to say 'Culture is not a commodity' is merely to hide reality with your desires. The fact that one often sees this slogan above stands at trade fairs alongside stands for various artisanal products and marginally produced cultural commodities is enough to show up the self-contradictory nature of this slogan. Culture *is* a commodity - the commodity that sells all the others '. A critique of culture, so much part of the movement 35 years ago, has been forgotten, ignored, and repressed. Despite the fact that, post-'68, the Situationists generally fought alienation by alienated means, it was their innovative development of a critique of culture

that contributed so much to the movement of 1968 (for example, they recognised that, despite their intentions, most of the results of the experiments of the Surrealists were essentially to help develop intriguing cultural images that helped update the commodity-spectacle; see, in particular, Vaneigem's [A Cavalier History of Surrealism](#)).

With the developing repression and supercession of tribal societies by class society, religion and the art that reinforced it became linked to the appearance of a division within the communal life where a representative caste of priests emerged to mediate between gods and society. Art appeared linked to the development of magic, ritual and tools as society developed new relationships to the rest of nature. As class society developed, the fruits of exploitation flowed to the rulers and created a class with a surplus of leisure time and resources to produce and create in non-essential activities - and so aesthetics developed as a specialised practice of both production (artistic creativity) and consumption (cultural appreciation).

Culture is a product of class society, the hierarchical division of labour. Culture' as a separate sphere of creativity' never existed in tribal societies. "In my tribe there are no poets. Everyone talks in poetry", an American Indian said.[\[6\]](#)

Nowadays, culture is as taboo to criticise today as religion was at the time of the French Revolution, over 200 years ago[\[7\]](#). The collapse of all Divine unitary references of culture with the bourgeois revolution meant the loss of a false hierarchical unity, cemented by God, in which mass human history did not officially exist and wasn't represented in its art. But the failure of the masses of individuals to break through to *real* liberty, equality and fraternity - i.e. the failure of the masses of individuals to creatively transform daily life - created the beginning of the conflict between the cultural protest against this situation and the culture that glorified it. **Having failed to put the heart into a heartless world, many began to create the art of an artless life.** The flowering of very different and opposing tendencies within culture - culture which praised the existing New Order and innovative culture which experimented against the dominant society (the same happened in the sphere of philosophy and revolutionary theory) - was based on the fundamental repression of the hopes of this revolutionary period and the struggle to realise these hopes in changed conditions. From Blake to the Symbolists, via Shelley and Byron, to the Dadaists and the Surrealists, the struggle was always for a different world - a search for lost unity - but (like with Marx and Bakunin) everywhere the results were very different from the ones intended.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF REBELLIOUS MUSIC

One can also see this in the history of black music. John Little, a 19th century American ex-slave said, “*They say slaves are happy because they laugh and are merry. I myself and three or four others have received two hundred lashes in the day and had our feet in fetters; yet at night we would sing and dance and make others laugh at the rattling of our chains. Happy men we must have been! We did it to keep down trouble and to keep our hearts from being completely broken...*”. From the development of the singing of slaves to blues to jazz to rock and roll one can see the development from a protective way of keeping one's spirits up to a marginal sub-culture outside of any money-making to a marginal culture as a precarious means of survival to an utterly commodified form of big business, which nowadays goes so far as doing market research even before putting a band together. One can see elements of this in the development of Rai music in Algeria, which was originally part of the culture of the Algerian unemployed in the 80s, an expression of their hatred of the State and their disdain for Islam, music that spoke of love, alcohol and boredom, a music that was often repressed by State censorship. But now it 's so mainstream it can be part of the French equivalent of *Fame Academy* - “*Star Academy*” [8](whilst meanwhile, the French State surreptitiously supports the repression of social movements in Algeria from which Rai developed, supported by the silence of the same media that has made Rai utterly innocuous). The progression from a marginal form of “self-expression” in some ways in protest against the existing order to the commodification of this partial self-expression is nowadays not just enormously speeded up but, considering how far individuals are repressed and colonised by the tastes of the spectacularised market, is already there in this so-called “self-expression” from the age of 7. Today, people can only *imitate* - by coldly, soullessly, learning formal techniques - the qualities born out of risky experimentation and a truly rebellious life that created the life-enhancing music of the past. Weaned on and domesticated by ***Star Academy*** and other role models for correct' forms of banal creativity', young people would need a massive revolution to unleash the imagination, energy and passion needed to re-invent music as an extension of individual playful contact “*to keep our hearts from being completely broken*”.

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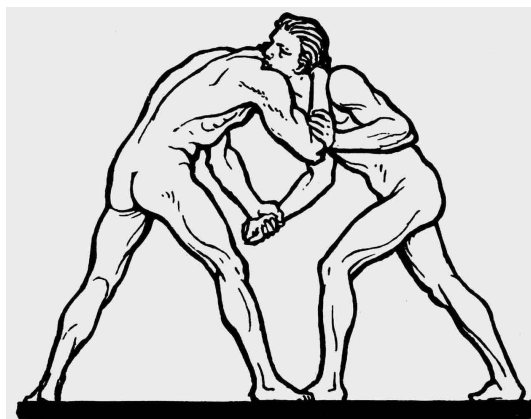
To critique culture today you get instantly categorised as ascetic; it seems to many to be as mad as opposing good food or sex. But just as there's a difference between *Ready, Steady, Cook!*, a small restaurant and eating a good meal with friends, or between *Playboy* magazine, a prostitute and a tender fuck with someone you love, so there 's a difference between Mass Culture, marginal culture and real living. Or you get categorised as a Nazi - after all, it was Goering who, in his only memorable quote, said, “*When I hear the word culture' I reach for my gun*”. The Nazis, of course, weren't against culture as *such* - immediately after some mass slaughter, Nazi concentration camp officers

would often quickly relax by listening to some uplifting Mozart symphony played by a mainly Jewish orchestra. The point, unlike Goering's attitude, is to go *beyond* culture, not repress it by means of the State - to *realise* the radical desires it can only represent, attacking it as a specialised activity, attacking it *without* the support of *hierarchical* violence.

Or you get categorised as a philistine - but the real philistines are today's culture vultures: how many of them know a thing about the revolutionary search in art up until the mid-1960s? Such ignorance of the past is essential to pass off artworks as innovative novelties, at the same time stereotyping those who think modern art is pretentious crap as stuck-in-the-past fuddy-duddies

Nowadays there's no way of expressing anything subversively innovative within cultural forms: it's all been done before but better, and even then it all got co-opted into the system it tried to challenge. And since the 1960s it's clear that **culture itself is the sell-out**. Even those free cultural spectacles which have nothing to do with making money (e.g. those squirmingly pretentious anarchist-type poetry readings, complete with atmospheric percussion, treated with as much silent reverence as a congregation treats a church sermon) educate people to accept their role of positive approving spectators. No-one dares cry out:

“The Emperor has no clothes!”



- 30th Oct., 2003

P.S. After this was written, the intermittents were involved in several interesting activities, including disrupting the National Assembly (France's Parliament), invading a news studio during a live news broadcast, and several other activities. In June 2004 they threatened to close down the Cannes film festival, which was enough to encourage hotel workers, during a very important season for the tourist industry, to come out on a brief wildcat strike, but the intermittents didn't really connect to these workers (whether this was due to their illusions that they were somehow different or not, I don't know). Some of them invaded and took over a cinema, only to be chucked out by the cops and badly beaten up. This scared the government into an apology for the behaviour of the CRS, something quite rare. But it meant nothing, obviously: those arrested were sent to trial and a couple of the cops involved were briefly suspended from duty. But the apology had the desired effect of taking the heat out of the situation, especially as the intermittents left it up to the CGT to organise them - they were allowed to make a public televised statement about their case, as if that could change things. A great opportunity to really threaten some aspects of the movie industry was lost, as was the battle against the change in their status. Consequently, now many intermittents have a vastly reduced income and their fight is largely forgotten.

(Winter 2004)

[1]

The connection between the repression of the masses of individuals and their attraction to celebrities reminds us of what Wilhelm Reich observed in his analysis of fascism and Hitler's "charisma": what individuals repress in themselves, and/or are forced to repress, gets channelled into a delirious admiration for celebrities who are the specialised external expression' of these repressed qualities (Reich's limitation in his analysis was to reduce repression to sexuality, when what is repressed is not just the body and the capacity for direct love between individuals but also critical intellect and practical subversive social opposition, all of which dialectically interact with one another). Nowadays, though there are still fanatical fans, most people, in keeping with the resigned cynicism of the times, have an unenthusiastic, take it or leave it, attitude to famous people, expressing an indifference also to what is repressed in themselves, especially class anger.

[2] Freche has the delirious arrogance of someone who has been mayor of a quickly expanding city for **24 years**. His other job is a professor and, followed by cameramen, whenever he sees a student of his in the street, he doesn't hesitate to publicly and loudly humiliate them for their ignorance, enough to get these embarrassed students' photos printed in the local papers.

However, even those who criticise his megalomania praise him for his own contribution to the civilising influence of culture - in the form of urban regeneration. He is praised for instigating the transformation of an ever overflowing river running through a fairly barren, semi-marsh wilderness into an utterly boring but flood-controlled river which is virtually unrecognisable as a river - more like some very large canal-like ultra-bland tame water feature. And now the river runs through a vast complex of Greek-inspired architecture that looks like a gigantic

ultra-smooth version of some old-style Hollywood blockbuster, intended to overwhelm you into feeling even smaller, distracted and isolated than normal. Being such a large area, it's repetitive grandiose heaviness seems almost unending in its uniform, immutable, ice-cold permanence. Yet, at the same time, unlike the horrible classical Greek architecture on which it's based, it also seems tacky, it's pretensions and appearance paper-thin: overwhelmingly heavy yet shoddily insubstantial, like the social relations that created it.

[3] At the mass get-together in Larzac this summer, in an exemplary action, the Socialist Party bookstall was forced to be dismantled by the angry threats of anarchists and others. Meanwhile, the star of the show - Jose Bove - showed how *unexemplary* he is by shaking the hand of the Interior Minister, the hated Nicolas Sarkozy.

[4] Most people don't see themselves as proletarians, dismissing the term as archaic, Marxist-Leninist or whatever. Perhaps it's the ideology and practice of professionalism that stops people admitting to the fact that they have no control over their lives, that they are proletarians in this sense, and in the sense that if they wish to not be utterly swept away by fate, they have to struggle to oppose their commodification. And to go beyond the separate categories that resignation to commodification imposes: Perhaps people also don't like to think of themselves as proletarians nowadays because it implies a stance of opposition they no longer feel capable of.

[5] The only likely difference is that those experimental spectacles with a pretension to some radical' critique will not be invested in; they will have to give up their illusion of being in some way subversive, be incorporated into the acceptable cynicism of this world, get rid of their overly worthy seriousness - and end up like *The Simpsons*, which wittily combines cynical contempt for normality with a sympathetic insight into normality's foibles and contradictions, without the gauche pretension of appearing to show a revolutionary way out. Ideal for Tony Blair to appear on.

[6] H.Zinn, "A People's History of the United States".

[7] "A prisoner who cannot see the sky from his cell window may paint on his wall a scene of birds flying amongst clouds against a blue haze of space. Outside in the wider society art plays a similar role; what is denied and seems unreachable, but possible and desirable, is represented via the window of the picture frame or TV screen. So art/culture as the representation of what is repressed fuses with the commodity form; the very form whose domination has fragmented this creativity from the rest of life. (And with this fusion adverts become seen as "the cutting edge of art".)

The contradiction within art is that it appeals to our desire for realisation of what it represents - passion, creativity and other experience routinely denied in bourgeois society - but it only "realises" in a fragmented, isolated manner, separate from daily life. It is now art and the cultural spectacle, not religion, that is "*the opium of the people*" and "*the heart of a heartless world*." - from [A Closed Window Onto Another Life](#).

[8]. On October 18th, Saturday night, some dozens of intermittents, supported by demonstrators outside numbering hundreds, disrupted the French equivalent of *Fame Academy* - *Star Academy*' - by walking on stage with a big banner, initially held upside down, saying Turn off your telly'. The compere demonstrated what he was being paid for, other than for having the right connections. Normally boringly bland in his mediocre reassuring nice guy manner, he put

this apparently innocuous role to the defense of the status quo by calmly saying, as soon as the intermittents had seized the stage, "We're open to all points of view here - let's hear what you have to say", so showing his clever recuperator role in the middle of an unexpected situation. Initially the intermittents seemed to want to say nothing until an apparently reluctant spokesman came forward and said they were protesting about the changed conditions in the benefits system for intermittents, that the government was neglecting its responsibilities. It was a disappointing anti-climax to what could have been a momentous event - a bit like climbing Everest and then just sticking a flag on top of it. The gap between the achievement and the banal way it was expressed seemed like a small-scale version of the way proletarians in the past have seized the stage of history only to find themselves lost for words, unable to express their project and desires in anything other than received ideas. But perhaps this is being a bit unfair since they probably hadn't expected to get that far and, moreover, they had only about 15 seconds before the audience started jeering and the compere said "We'll continue this, but first let's go into a short commercial break, o.k.?", after which the show was cut for 2 hours whilst the programme planners hastily put on some cop show as a temporary replacement. This, during the weekly prime-time slot for TV audiences - it's a top pop show; Elton John, Sting, Diane Myonogue, Johnny Hallyday, Gilbert Bécaud have all been on it recently. A window was broken, and three intermittents were arrested, charged with violence'. In fact, TV news the next day said that the intermittents had *violently* stormed the studio. Apparently there was a big fight between security guards and intermittents. If these excellent initiatives are to develop in the future, they'd have a far more widespread and subversive effect if accompanied by some radical critique, written and/or verbal. The social-democratic terms in which this disruption was expressed is very uninspiring. Although inevitably, such actions (like with strikes and riots) bring together people with a vast variety of varying viewpoints, there must be a few amongst these intermittents who have a passionate radical critique which needs to be communicated incisively. As it was, the disruption was a bit too insufficient considering what's at stake and considering the disgust probably a majority of intermittents feel for *Star Academy*.

