PART III

Issues

Chapter 18

Let's Get Serious: Notes on Teaching Youth Culture

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The lights in the lecture theater go down as 200 undergraduates' eyes flicker obediently towards the enlarged video screen. A fresh-faced John Lydon – Johnny Rotten as was – leers towards the politely attentive students. "God save the queen . . . She ain't no human bein' " he taunts, leaning into the camera with an expression that manages to be both half-crazed and whimsical. If most of the students enjoy this irreverent interruption, I am struck by the oddity of the moment, and it is at this point in my "Popular Culture and Cultural Studies" course that I am forced to confront the audacity involved in teaching youth culture to youth.

Although the lecture theater speakers keep the crashing sound of the old Sex Pistols ditty at a respectable volume, I like to think that they do not, even now, entirely contain the breezy, twinkle-eyed rudeness of the video clip. And yet this is, in the lifespan of popular culture, a piece of ancient history, one that has been plucked from dusty archives like a relic of a bygone age. Most of the students in the lecture theater are in their late teens or early twenties. This was the music I was listening to at their age, a time before they were born. I can't help wondering what on earth they make of it.

The aim of the lecture is to explore the connections and discontinuities between the economic structure of a cultural industry and the culture it produces, but the video clip is too loud to be read merely as an illustration of a particular point. It symbolizes not only the gap between professor and student but the difficulty of being analytical about something so visceral without appearing to entirely miss the point. I am reminded of the quip that writing about music is like dancing about architecture.[1] But I am more painfully aware that the link between the clip and my own youth labels me, to use the historically appropriate vernacular, as "a boring old fart," a status compounded by my attempt to be serious about something so playful.

At the risk of making matters irretrievably worse, I shall, in this essay, briefly ponder some of the issues this raises about the purpose and pitfalls of teaching popular culture. My main concern is one of being taken seriously, since whatever

else it might be, popular culture is a serious business. I shall begin with the general obstacle that lies in the path of those who might want to teach popular culture – especially youth culture – at an institutional level. Having made it to the lecture theater or the classroom, I will then briefly consider two major pedagogical difficulties: the problems involved in persuading "youth" to view their own culture critically; and the problem of authority on a terrain which appears to be the student's territory.

This chapter thereby puts forward three distinct arguments. First, teaching popular culture and/or youth culture is something that has been forced upon the academy rather than embraced by it. Indeed, it is regarded with skepticism in many sectors of elite public discourse. We are therefore operating in a potentially hostile climate – one that requires us to be more forceful and less opaque than we have been in advocating the importance of teaching popular culture. Second, that one of the main issues involved in teaching popular culture is to address the politics of pleasure – and, in particular, the specific forms of investment that undergraduates bring to popular youth culture. Third, that we need to acknowledge the awkward pedagogy invoked by the example with which I began, when the past and present of popular culture tend to separate the teacher from the student, and where our frames of reference will be quite different.

Popular Culture and the Climate of Anti-intellectualism

If the idea that popular culture could be the subject-matter for academic inquiry is gradually gaining acceptance, there are still many who regard the whole exercise as essentially trivial. This suspicion is perhaps most regularly exhibited in Britain – where an odd combination of stuffiness and cynicism has given rise to a chorus of sneers about media and cultural studies. Whether it is dismissed for being too lightweight or too pretentious, the assumption is that popular culture – especially popular youth culture – lacks the gravitas and tedium required of an academic subject. The paradox of these dismissals, I would argue, is that the claim to promote academic standards is delivered from a profoundly anti-intellectual stance.

The gist of the argument against popular culture is that university teaching and research should be difficult and complex, while media and popular culture is so patently easy and accessible that it scarcely requires a degree to understand it. Popular culture, it is suggested, should be what students do outside their classes, not in them.

In its most virulent form, this argument presents the media or cultural studies teacher as a figure of derision or ridicule – a flaky pseudo-intellectual whose antics are the source of amusement or despair at the decline in educational standards. Those who teach media and cultural studies tend to be either defensive or dismissive about these criticisms. Nevertheless, we have, as a group, done

a poor job of countering them with an argument for taking popular culture seriously, and it is worth reminding ourselves and others why many of us write about and teach popular culture.

The problem with the attack on popular culture in the academy is three-fold. First, it assumes that if something is popular, there can't be much to it. Second, it entirely overlooks the importance of popular culture in shaping or defining human development. And third, it tends to assume that popular culture is the expression of public taste (and hence something that needs little explanation), rather than the product of an array of structural conditions.

The first of these problems is, as Pierre Bourdieu has pointed out, a matter of class distinction, of marking a territory of "legitimate" culture that is generally beyond the reach of popular understanding and appreciation.[2] These distinctions have traditionally been solidified by the aisles of scholarly books – on literature, art, and music – that assumed those distinctions. And yet the aesthetic differences between the popular and the refined have always been extraordinarily fragile. So fragile, indeed, that critics have expended enormous amounts of energy in explaining *why* something is worthy of scholarly scrutiny. We can read F. R. Leavis, for example, as an attempt to police the boundaries of legitimate culture: his grudging acceptance of just *one* Dickens novel into *The Great Tradition* is a way to acknowledge the author's flair – but one senses that any further embrace would have been, for Leavis, a little too accepting of the novelist's links to popular culture (see Leavis 1948).

Leavis may no longer be fashionable, but the arts and humanities are still largely premised on notions of value. Canons may shift to reflect contemporary concerns – feminism and multiculturalism being particularly important in this regard – but inclusion in course syllabi is still generally based on a series of qualitative judgments, on the notion that something is worthy of study because it is worthy. This was a notion that some of the Marxist cultural theorists of the Frankfurt School were just as committed to as the less complicated exponents of elite culture.[3] Even Roland Barthes, whose work opened many avenues into the study of popular culture, afforded considerably more attention to Racine that he did to wrestling (see Barthes 1964 and 1988).

In this context, it is not hard to imagine the jaw-dropping incredulity felt by many when university libraries start filling their shelves with books about romance novels, *Star Trek*, or rap music. When Chris Woodhead, the Chief Inspector of Schools in Britain, launched a familiar attack on media studies, reporters had no difficulty finding academics to wax sardonically. So, for example, *The Independent* quoted Professor Alan Smithers thus: "So far there are not things like Shakespeare and Chaucer on some of the media being studied. I don't think it's the same having someone watch all 57 episodes of *The Sweeney*" (March 3, 2000). The carefully constructed distinctions that elevate cultural texts and objects to the professorial gaze are not so much threatened by such attention to popular culture as resolutely flouted. In this context, any backlash against such rude intrusions is entirely predictable.

But most of those in cultural studies who read, write, and teach such books are not making an argument that popular culture is (or can be) "as good as" traditional forms of art and literature – on the contrary, it is the *attacks* on media and cultural studies that tend to speak in terms of quality. If media and cultural studies draw a great deal from the arts and humanities (where much of the work in fields such as semiotics and poststructuralism has been developed), it also has roots in the social sciences, where qualitative judgments about what is worthy of scrutiny have nothing to do with whether something is considered good or bad.[4] The reason for analyzing popular culture is not to assess its value but, in a more anthropological sense, its *significance*. In other words, a cultural object can be worthy of study regardless of whether it is considered good or bad.

As a consequence, it is important to resist the temptation to resort to qualitative judgments in defending popular culture.[5] This kind of response is all too common in cultural studies, from Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* (1958) onwards. Once the study of popular culture is predicated on aesthetic criteria it can only become embroiled in pointless arguments about the nature of those criteria. Popular culture is important, first and foremost, because it is popular.

In these terms, popular culture is, for most people most of the time, considerably more ubiquitous than most of the literature, music, or art studied in universities. Our lives are more often occupied by the television we watch, the magazines we read, the sports teams we support, the places we shop, the music we listen to, and so on. This is not to belittle the study of more rarefied forms of culture, nor to ignore the profundity of an encounter with cultural forms, but merely to appreciate the range of cultural forms available in a given society in attempting to understand that society. This has been understood by historians for some time.[6]

Which raises the second problem with the refusal to take popular culture seriously. To imagine that we live in a cognitive universe in which we file popular forms like television, fashion, or pop music into a mental compartment labeled "trivial ephemera" is sociologically naive. In short: popular consciousness is shaped by popular culture. Part of the failure to fully appreciate this point comes from the assumption that the influence of popular culture only matters if it leads to antisocial behavior or crude forms of mimicry – a kind of robotic response to commands from the cultural industries – or that the influence of popular culture relies on some form of gullibility. Since popular culture is not usually issued in the form of overt directives – "vote this way" or "challenge/obey authority" – its influence is unlikely to be felt in these terms.

One of the ways in which I make this point to my students is by asking them what they know. I begin by asking them to name the occupations of characters – either real or fictional – who are firmly inscribed in popular culture (such as Homer Simpson or Vanna White). This is familiar ground, and most raise their hands confidently. I then ask them to tell me the occupations of people who might be regarded as important but whose presence in popular culture is minimal (such as UN general secretary Kofi Annan or John Sweeney, the head of the

AFL-CIO). Very few raise their hands (thus John Sweeney may be the head of the largest labor organization in the US while occupying a position of almost complete obscurity in the culture), and many students look sheepish as if expecting an admonition for absorbing trivia at the expense of more important information. And yet the point of the exercise is simply to demonstrate that much of what we know about the world – the people, images, stories, and associations that accumulate in our heads – comes from popular culture. Even if this knowledge had little impact on people's opinions (an epistemologically absurd proposition, in my view), its voluminous presence is part of what defines contemporary life. And this is hardly a trivial matter.

This, in turn, raises the third difficulty of ignoring popular culture as an object of study. As Stuart Hall (1986) points out, popular culture may be for the people but it not by the people. And cultural studies has long insisted that the cultural industries are far more than mere reflections of something produced elsewhere (whether popular desires or dominant ideologies). There is, in this sense, nothing "natural" or inevitable about popular culture. Why is it, for example, that soccer is largely ignored by North American adults when it is so popular in most of the places that their ancestors came from? If the question seems fairly unimportant in the scheme of things – which it may well be – the answer involves a complex understanding of the way culture works, part of which requires us to appreciate the role television plays in promoting certain sports and, as a consequence, the very particular history of commercial broadcasting in the United States. So, for example, if the United States is unusual in ignoring soccer, it is also distinctive in having a broadcasting system that has – at least since the 1930s – been conceived primarily (from an industry perspective) as a marketing tool. In such a system, a sport that requires 45 to 50 minutes of uninterrupted program time is, if not quite an impossibility, certainly less attractive than sports with frequent breaks – like boxing or baseball – or sports that could be easily molded around frequent breaks – like basketball or American Football. Similarly, if commercial media seem quintessentially "American," their evolution was not inexorable, nor was it a response to public demand – it was the highly contested victory of one set of forces against another (see e.g. McChesney 1990; Douglas 1987; Kellner 1990). And as Michael Real (1989) has argued, the consequent development of American Football (as opposed to soccer) has a range of cultural resonances.

This is by no means the only answer to this question – there are cultural histories involved here that go beyond the political economy of sport and media, while cultural expectations can become self-determining – but it is one that illustrates the way in which economic or social structures can limit or shape cultural possibilities in very specific ways. Even the pop music industry – which is, perhaps, striking for its moments of aesthetic autonomy (thus, for example, punk rock in Britain developed *before* a huge rise in youth unemployment rather than being a straightforward reaction to socioeconomic conditions) – consists of rhythms and tunes arising from a backdrop of industry structures, immigration

patterns, social welfare policies, and an array of ideological struggles around gender, sex, race, family, age, authority, and power.

Understanding contemporary society is therefore central to an understanding of popular culture. And since popular culture is the terrain upon which social and ideological struggles are played out, understanding popular culture is central to an understanding of contemporary society.

In this context, to regard the study of popular culture as trivial is to deny any serious engagement with our cultural environment, whether to appreciate why it is thus, how it could be different, or what its consequences are for our social development. Indeed, even if we accepted the unlikely proposition that popular culture was a discrete realm of no significance beyond an imagined set of boundaries, to imagine life without advertising, or sport, or television – regardless of whether we view it as an absence or a freedom – is to imagine a social transformation. To refuse to imagine it is to stifle intellectual inquiry and, as a consequence, a range of cultural possibilities.

As I have suggested, it is in Britain that this stubborn anti-intellectualism is most often articulated. This is all the more notable given the intellectual history of the study of popular culture. Rather than celebrate the enormous global influence of British cultural studies, the study of media and popular culture is more often portrayed as an embarrassment – the "media studies lecturer" being regarded in many circles with much the same snickering contempt reserved for British sociologists in the sixties and seventies. The strength of this kind of British anti-intellectualism is a complex articulation whose roots might be found scattered amidst ideas of class, sexuality, and the self-regarding professionalism in some quarters of British journalism. But it is by no means an exclusively British phenomenon. Even in the Unites States – a place that is much more receptive to the study of popular culture – there are areas of lingering suspicion. When I first proposed teaching a regular course in popular culture at the University of Massachusetts in 1990, the Faculty Senate Committee charged with approving new courses expressed initial concern about its "academic" content – a response that revealed a certain unease with the presence of the popular in the academy (teaching *un*popular forms of culture, on the other hand, is assumed to have a certain scholarly worthiness).

Needless to say, negative reactions to teaching popular culture have done little to halt its growth in colleges and universities. This is, in part, because of the influence of such work on young academics and the popularity of – and demand for – such courses among students (a demand that generally exceeds supply, sometimes leading – interestingly – to more rigorous academic requirements than for less popular subjects). It would be overoptimistic to assume that its popularity with students is always a product of the same kinds of concerns that drive those of us who teach it.[7] At the same time, teaching young adults about *their* popular culture is precarious for all concerned. Enrollment may not be a problem, but provoking engagement in a serious analysis of popular youth culture is a little trickier. I want to consider two difficulties here: the problem

of establishing a critical distance with a subject that may involve a high degree of emotional investment, and the gap between student and teacher in their popular cultural references.

The Politics of Pleasure

I am often asked by my students – and this will be familiar to others who teach media and cultural studies – about my *own* experience of popular culture. After all, my apparent desire to analyze everything most people do for fun does seem a little peculiar. How, they ask, do I do everyday things like watching television or going shopping? Do I exist in a permanent state of critique, in which popular culture is consumed through a relentlessly analytical lens? Since I seem, to them, inclined to deconstruct everything from sitcoms to photo albums, it is impossible for them to imagine me relaxing in front of the TV set. Or, to put it another way, I appear to have become emotionally and intellectually divested from the entire realm. While some are faintly in awe of this idea, for most people the image conjures up an alien and rather clinical existence. All work and no play must give the professor a dull life.

The question is partly a consequence of the link between investment and pleasure. If we do not have a stake in popular culture – if we are always critically disengaged – then how can we enjoy it? While the question may seem quaint or naive, it is nonetheless an important one – one that forces us to address ways in which we might deal with the various commitments people have to popular cultural forms.

A recent study by Chyng Sun (1999) examines some of the pedagogical issues that confront teachers who want to equip their students with the tools for a critical textual analysis of a piece of popular culture in which they are invested. The study involved Disney's *The Little Mermaid* – a film most of the students had seen countless times, and which was, for many, a fond (and not too distant) childhood memory. Students were asked to read Hans Andersen's original story and then to compare the two in order to consider some of the ideological moves made by the Disney version – particularly in relation to gender stereotyping. Sun's study of this process powerfully conveyed the degree to which the students' investment in the film – as part of their own cultural history – made it difficult for them to accept an analysis that in other circumstances they may have found compelling. In brief, ideological scrutiny of Disney's *The Little Mermaid* was difficult to accept because it seemed to belittle their own cultural history – to trample clumsily over a happy childhood memory. It was, in a sense, killjoy criticism.

Asking students to examine their popular culture requires them to confront their own fragile subjectivity. This can be especially uncomfortable in a culture that promotes notions of independence, individuality, and free will – especially in matters of cultural consumption. To see oneself as socially constructed and

popular culture as part of that process is unsettling – all the more so when the analysis throws up contradictions between politics and pleasure. So, for example, many of the students in Sun's study might have been more inclined to endorse a critique of gender stereotyping in contexts in which they were less obviously invested. This may be why Jean Kilbourne's critique of gender roles in advertising has been so extraordinarily successful in its appeal to students[8] – while they may enjoy a particularly well-crafted or witty commercial, few young people feel they have an emotional stake in advertising as a genre. Disney's *The Little Mermaid*, on the other hand, was something they wanted to feel nostalgia towards without being burdened by the need to either embrace or ignore traditional images of female passivity. Female students were put in the particularly difficult position of confronting their own hitherto unquestioning acceptance of stereotypical gender roles.

If this investment attracts students to the study of popular culture – here, after all, is subject-matter they already feel they know and perhaps enjoy – it can, by the same token, make them wary of attempts to mess with their pleasures and preconceptions. Some, like John Fiske (1989) or Henry Jenkins (1992), have partly avoided this problem by invoking their own "fandom" and by stressing the semiotic potential of popular texts. Such a position allows a degree of common ground from which critiques might be developed. So, for example, Jenkins described how gay fans of *Star Trek* were able to exploit the textual ambiguities of the show, and to then move to a more critical position in terms of representational politics. Such an approach creates a degree of solidarity, because, like much literary criticism, it comes from a generally appreciative standpoint. But regardless of whether or not this "insider" posture makes analysis more or less astute, it is not a position that can be easily sustained across a syllabus. Apart from anything else, it either limits us to those forms of popular culture we enjoy, or else requires a rather disingenuous posturing.

We need, nonetheless, to find ways to negotiate the politics of pleasure, of showing how certain popular pleasures are articulated with constraining ideologies (like patriarchy) and how they might be rearticulated with other ideological possibilities.[9] This is more straightforward in instances where the culture offers glimpses of both (say, for example, music video or rap music). There are, however, important instances where cultural forms have become naturalized, and where alternatives seem remote, difficult to imagine, or unsettling in their unfamiliarity.

In the US, perhaps the most significant example of this is the commercial model of broadcasting. It is difficult for students to understand the constraints and proclivities of this system without them appreciating how else it could be. To this end, we can take students through broadcasting history in order to demonstrate how notions of public-service broadcasting were marginalized and, after a brief resurgence in the 1960s, virtually eradicated. We can then examine the many limitations that come with corporate oligopolies using television and radio as a mechanism for selling audiences to advertisers, both in terms of ideological

limits (whereby broadcasting is required to promote an ideology of individual consumerism) and the aesthetic limits of programs that must successfully deliver audiences to advertisers every 7 or 8 minutes. But while students in the US may grasp all of this in general, abstract terms, their experience of television tells them that commercial television is often entertaining while public service television (PBS) is generally drab. These powerful associations are likely to limit imaginations to such an extent that a critical history and analysis of commercial broadcasting will ultimately flounder on the suspicion that public-service television would take a popular show like *ER* and turn it into *Masterpiece Theater*. It is in this sense that one could argue that PBS in its current form – as an alternative to rather than a different kind of popular television – plays a significant role in maintaining the hegemony of the commercial system (see Ouellette 1999).

The only way to deal with these associations, I would argue, is to confront them head on, to discuss the ways in which these associations have been constructed, and whose interests they serve. This leaves the difficult task of rearticulating some of commercial television's popular pleasures – well-constructed stories, high production values, and so on – with imaginary pleasures which a public-service system might offer (such as fewer commercials or a willingness to deal with controversial material that advertiser's might be squeamish about). Although this can be a difficult and somewhat precarious task, a critical analysis of broadcasting will be merciless if it is presented as a choice between acquiescing to corporate, consumerist notions of citizenship or else submitting oneself to a diet of dreariness.

If we may stretch the analogy a little, we might say that students will see little value in divesting themselves from popular culture – in order to achieve a critical distance – if they see no opportunity of investment in other forms of pleasure. This, in turn, forces us to consider the pleasures of popular culture and how these pleasures do or do not relate to ideological positions. Thus, for example, Janice Radway (1984, 1986, 1994) recognizes the pleasure of romance novels and considers how these pleasures can be separated from patriarchal ideologies.

We may discover, of course, that what some people like about certain popular cultural forms is precisely the ideological baggage they may carry. So, for example, it may be that some people like advertising not because of its production values (which might be rearticulated with notions of citizenship rather than consumerism) but because they wish – along with the genre – to celebrate the joys of consumption. It is our job, in this instance, to point out the nature of this (or any other) ideological choice and discuss its broader social consequences.[10]

Teaching Past the Present

One of the most striking aspects of contemporary popular culture is the speed at which it changes and evolves. Many forms of popular culture therefore tend to be age-specific – particularly those linked to youth. Perhaps the most obvious

example of this is the pop music industry, whose products seem to stick to us like some form of aural glue, trapping generations in a permanent taste culture. The pop music industry – particularly in the second half of the twentieth century – can thus be easily subdivided into mini-epochs, each with their distinctive sound and styles. Indeed, the simple act of naming a decade is to summon up echoes of one pop music genre or another. Bob Dylan concerts may not be exclusively the preserve of aging baby boomers, but their presence at such events is as striking as the absence of hip hop in their collections.

One can bemoan the conservatism of those who stop listening to anything genuinely new or different past the age of 30 – and teachers of popular culture often feel themselves (perhaps a little smugly) atypically transcendent in this respect – but we should not overlook why this is and what it means. To put it candidly, many will feel that there is something a little odd about someone in their forties (still fairly young for an academic, but several mini-epochs removed from most students) claiming a degree of expertise about cultural forms that are almost exclusively the preserve of those in their teens or twenties.

Despite the claims of some of the more essentialist forms of identity politics, one does not have to be of a cultural milieu to be able to speak – and speak in ways that are illuminating – about that milieu. But this is not an excuse for blundering into cultural domains in which we may be seen as outsiders without giving a certain pause. In the case of pop music culture, for example, it may be possible to know about the more recent genres and to thereby locate them within structures of ideology, aesthetics, or political economy, but this knowledge does not presuppose an equivalence. Pop music culture and youth culture are experientially linked in particular ways: pop music provides the sound effects for the litany of experience that defines youth and young adulthood, the freshness and excitement of one thereby becomes associated with the freshness and excitement of the other.

These connections are vividly evoked in Susan Douglas's (1994) cultural history *Where the Girls Are*, in which she recounts the very particular pleasure of listening to the Beatles or the Shirelles and the symbolic role they played in defining gender roles and, contradictorily, in liberating girls from those roles. Indeed, it is partly because pop music is one of the more intimate cultural forms – sex, love, pain, and rebellion, for example, are not just its subject-matter but its accompaniment – that genres tend to stick with us with the exploratory intensity of the early encounters through which we feel our way into adulthood. Growing up with hip hop is therefore quite different from encountering it in middle age. It becomes less bound up with notions of authenticity or with locales of space and place.

Equally, to return to the example with which I began, my students will experience late 1970s punk rock as part of someone else's history, something whose meaning is disconnected from the mood or a way of being that is indelibly forged in my own experience of something like *God Save the Queen*. For the students, there is no shock of the new, merely a shuffling of genealogical context.

The meaning of *God Save the Queen* is thereby slotted into a history that ends with the present.

In this context, teaching youth culture to youth is partly a matter of avoiding various pedagogical pitfalls. Adopting a posture of hip solidarity – even if one is capable of pulling it off – not only risks being regarded as an imposter, it communicates a misunderstanding of how popular music and youth culture are bound up with one another. Pop music is made up of profoundly historical texts: their meaning cannot be united from the contexts in which they appear, and from the more general intertextuality of youth culture.

Equally, the valorization of particular moments of pop music history (most notoriously the 1960s, a period some baby-boom professors are inclined to endow with an authenticity from which all subsequent periods are a falling away) as somehow more important than the present may – depending on your system of evaluation – be plausible. But for most students, the significance of the past is measured in terms of its relation to the current, and the only vibrant living youth culture available *as* youth culture is in the here and now.

Avoiding these two positions – either a hip solidarity or treatment of the present as merely an offshoot of the past – requires an attitude of measured deference: an understanding of what makes contemporary youth culture distinct rather than unique. Since we are obliged to teach the history of popular cultural forms (if we are to understand them), this involves using a teleological narrative *without* naturalizing the present. Presenting the history of popular culture as somehow leading up (or else failing to lead up) to contemporary forms or versions is more compelling for most undergraduates. This is a useful pedagogical strategy, but like most teleological narratives it can make the present *appear* to be the final chapter – the "end of history" in which the cultural industries are absorbed by a few dozen huge transnational corporations.

One way to avoid this premature ending is teach *past* the present, to ask students to use their knowledge of history to speculate about the development of the cultural industries. This can, apart from anything else, be fun. It also requires us to incorporate an understanding of *cultural policy* in teaching popular culture. For most students (especially in the US) the "invisible hand" shaping cultural policy is not the marketplace but government subsidy and regulation – "invisible" because so much cultural policy is inadvertent. So, for example, the US government's adoption of a range of policies – massive subsidy for roads rather than rapid urban transit, weak zoning regulations and tax breaks based on accelerated depreciation of property investment – led to the ubiquity of the suburban shopping mall and the decline of city centers (see Jackson 1996). But while the outcome of these policies has transformed the cultural landscape in the United States, this was not their intent. Thus although the US may have no official cultural policy, it has a vast apparatus of cultural *policies* – from the subsidizing of advertizing expenditure through tax breaks to public funding for college radio stations – which have been instrumental in shaping its cultural industries (see Dimaggio 1983; Miller 1993).

Once students begin to understand the relation between cultural policies and cultural forms, they can begin to imagine how things might be. The present thereby becomes a moment in a historical trajectory – privileged, but a moment nonetheless. The scope of this imagining relies upon an understanding in which history moves in zig zags, circles, and squiggles rather than straight lines. So, for example, the well-known study by Peterson and Berger (1990) demonstrates that corporate consolidation in the pop music industry has waxed and waned: the apparently ironclad control of the industry by a corporate oligopoly in the early 1950s and then again in the mid-1970s, proved, on both occasions, to be neither inexorable nor entrenched. The market power of the conglomerates was, in both instances, an insufficient basis for maintaining artistic control in an industry where the desire for novelty and innovation is purely served by the conservative corporate dynamics of minimizing risk and maximizing profit. The current state of the industry – in which the corporate sector has bought up the "independent" sector (see Miller 1997) – can therefore be seen as unstable, rather than the final triumphant return of the corporate giants.

In sum, what I am proposing here is that we use the present as our focal point, since this is the lens through which our students will understand the history of popular youth culture. But if this focal point is, in a sense, the end of the history that preceded it, the complex twists and turns of that history helps us *also* see the present as the beginning of a range of possibilities. And if students are to feel that they can have any part in shaping these possibilities, then cultural policy must be enmeshed into the pedagogy of teaching popular culture.

Notes

1 A comment with which Andrew Goodwin begins *Dancing in the Distraction Factory*, his 1992 book about MTV.
2 Outlined in Pierre Bourdieu's book *Distinction* (1984).
3 See, for example, the oft-criticized cultural elitism of Adorno and Horkheimer's famous essay on "The Culture Industry as Mass Deception" (1979).
4 An argument that has also been made by some community artists – see, for example, Kelly 1984.
5 Which is not to say that qualitative judgments are not important – on the contrary, we need to make distinctions in order to describe cultural possibilities. But to argue that we study popular culture because it is good is, in my view, to miss the point.
6 Whether it is E. P. Thompson's influential *The Making of the English Working Class* (1968) or Kenneth Jackson's discussion of shopping malls (1996), historians who want to deal with popular life rather than the history of elites have to confront popular culture, and they may do so without the obligation to make value judgments.
7 My large lecture course in popular culture is always heavily over-enrolled, but I am under no illusions that this is purely in response to a thirst for reading Antonio Gramsci or Roland Barthes.

8 Kilbourne's *Killing Us Softly* is, to my knowledge, the most successful video about media ever made. Kilbourne has, Hollywood-syle, recently made the third version of this tape *Killing Us Softly III*.

9 See Morley 1992 for a discussion of pleasure and hegemony, and Hall 1996 or Slack 1996 for a discussion of articulation.

10 See, for example, Sut Jhally's video *Advertising and the End of the World* for a rather dramatic example of spelling out the consequences of a cultural system.

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