

1 Constructing the Popular: Cultural Production and Consumption

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Our interest in the study of popular culture was generated by a serendipitous encounter some twelve years ago. In the late 1980s both of us were in the Department of Sociology at the University of California–Santa Barbara, Lee as a graduate student and Denise as a faculty member. Our offices happened to be located across the hall from one another, and one Spring day Lee was explaining to her officemate the ramifications of the latest plot twist on ABC’s long-running soap opera “General Hospital.” She was apparently talking louder than she realized because when she stepped into the hall Denise beckoned her over and said, “I couldn’t help but overhearing – you’re a ‘General Hospital’ fan too?” As it turns out, we had both watched the show since the mid-1970s. Thus was born an ongoing collaboration in the sociological study of popular culture.

We both began teaching pop culture courses in 1993, Denise to graduate students at UC-Santa Barbara and Lee to undergraduates at Miami University of Ohio. As class materials we relied on photocopied packets of individual articles since no published collection met our shared needs. We wanted our students to read works that covered a wide range of content (such as music, television, magazines, sport, advertising and comics), reflected the myriad disciplinary perspectives that might be brought to bear on the study of popular culture (including sociology, anthropology, geography, English, communications, history, fine arts, sport studies and marketing), represented a variety of theoretical frameworks (such as media studies, cultural studies, literary theory, cultural sociology and political economy), addressed issues of diversity (race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexuality, age and socioeconomic class), and were accessible, enjoyable and intellectually provocative. The current collection, we hope, meets these needs for our readers as well as ourselves.

Defining the Popular

In this chapter we offer readers a general introduction to the origins of pop culture research, the background and approach of three major schools of thought, and some of the key areas of consensus and debate in the scholarly literature. As we shall see, research on popular culture is extremely diverse and challenging. We will conclude the chapter by introducing the conceptual framework for this particular collection of readings. Specifically, we suggest that the concept of a *circuit of culture* (du Gay, 1997; du Gay et al., 1997) provides a useful guide for ourselves and our students as

we begin to establish links between the complex processes of cultural production and consumption.

No academic writing on popular culture can proceed, however, without first attempting to define the term, a feat easier said than done. Despite the fact that we all seem to know what we are talking about when we talk about pop culture, its exact meaning has been debated for decades. Raymond Williams argues that the word “popular” has at least four current meanings. First, it can refer simply to those objects or practices that are well-liked by a lot of people.¹ Or, it can be used to refer to objects or practices deemed inferior and unworthy. In this view, popular culture is everything left over after we have identified what constitutes elite or “high” culture – that is, the paintings and sculptures and symphonies typically associated with the wealthy and well-educated (see below). The term can also refer to “work deliberately setting out to win favour with the people.” In this usage, popular culture is explicitly commercial: it is work that is produced *to be* consumed. Finally, the term can refer to the objects and practices “actually made by the people for themselves” (Williams, 1983, p. 237).

These different meanings are all useful and accurate, we believe, depending on context and the particular cultural objects or practices in question. The definition that guided us in compiling this collection is that offered by Mukerji and Schudson:

We will sidestep a great many terminological disputes with the inclusive claim that popular culture refers to the beliefs and practices, and the objects through which they are organized, that are widely shared among a population.

(Mukerji and Schudson, 1991, p. 3)

While the readings collected here focus primarily on the various forms of mass entertainment that usually come to mind when one hears the term, we recognize that popular culture also includes other beliefs and practices that comprise our everyday lived experience: the food we eat, the clothing we wear, the people we spend time with, the gossip we share, the roadways we travel, and so forth.

Popular Culture in the Academy

Despite its embeddedness in everyday life (or perhaps because of it), popular culture’s location in the academy has long been problematic. For example, it was not until the mid-twentieth century that popular culture was first legitimized as a focus of study in the US, and widespread legitimation has been a very gradual process (see Mukerji and Schudson, 1991, p. 3). Scholars of, and courses on, popular culture remain suspect in many departments and universities worldwide, reflecting the persistent disbelief that academic theories and methodologies can shed new light on phenomena whose meanings seem transparently obvious. Every year students in Lee’s undergraduate course on soap operas report being derided by roommates, friends, parents and even their formal academic advisors for not signing up for a “real” class. Most of us recognize the value of scholarly guidance in our attempts to understand Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* or the musical compositions of Philip Glass, but can the same be true for Teletubbies, motocross, and hip hop?

The answer, increasingly, is “yes.” The past 50 years have witnessed a steady growth of academic interest in popular culture as reflected in both increased scholarship and gradual transformations of formal curricula. Some disciplines have clearly been more receptive than others. Sociologists, for example, have conducted pop culture research since the early twentieth century and generally take for granted its legitimacy within the academy (which is not to say, of course, that their research findings necessarily “support” pop culture). Literary studies, in contrast, was much slower to accept pop culture as a serious focus of inquiry; critics charge that its lingering preoccupation with the idea of a canon lead to an elitist dismissal of “lesser” cultural texts.² In many ways, the gradual infusion of popular culture throughout the academy in the past several decades has proven truly transformative. “The process of legitimating popular culture studies in recent years has . . . been associated with major theoretical challenges to basic assumptions” of a number of different disciplines, including history, anthropology, sociology, and literary studies. As a result, “students of popular culture . . . have simultaneously worked in the tradition of their disciplines and fought with their premises” (Mukerji and Schudson, 1991, pp. 4–5).³

The study of popular culture today takes place within a wide variety of disciplinary and theoretical frameworks. While it is difficult to categorize all approaches, if one were to take a snapshot of the academy in the late twentieth century the photo would reveal at least three predominant schools of thought: the growing field of Cultural Studies, the Production of Culture perspective, and the Popular Culture Studies tradition. These perspectives share a belief in the legitimacy of pop culture research but have different underlying assumptions about the nature and consequences of the processes of cultural production and consumption. We briefly describe each perspective below, then turn to some of the key points of consensus and debate within pop culture scholarship as a whole.

The field of Cultural Studies grew out of efforts to understand a complex set of social and economic processes, including industrialization, modernization, urbanization, mass communication and the global economy (Nelson, Treichler, and Grossberg, 1992, p. 5). It first emerged in Great Britain in the 1950s and is most closely associated with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, which was founded in Birmingham, England in 1964. The focus of inquiry in Cultural Studies is extremely broad, as its practitioners argue that culture cannot be understood apart from other aspects of social life:

Continually engaging with the political, economic, erotic, social, and ideological, cultural studies entails the study of all relations between all the elements in a whole way of life.

(Nelson, Treichler, and Grossberg, 1992, p. 14; see also Barker and Beezer, 1992)

Cultural Studies is often difficult for students to understand, in part because it is relentlessly interdisciplinary and often heavily theoretical. Situated somewhere between the humanities and the social sciences, Cultural Studies has no clear methodology and no clearly defined area of content. Two main features distinguishing it from other perspectives are its emphasis on subjectivity, rather than the supposedly objective positivism associated with most social inquiry, and its explicitly political or

activist orientation. As scholars point out, Cultural Studies is both intellectual theory and political practice:

[A] continuing preoccupation within cultural studies is the notion of radical social and cultural transformation and how to study it . . . its practitioners see cultural studies not simply as a chronicle of social change but as an intervention in it, and see themselves not simply as scholars providing an account but as politically engaged participants.

(Nelson, Treichler, and Grossberg, 1992, p. 5)

When Italian scholar Antonio Gramsci's work became available in English in the 1970s, Cultural Studies' focus was redefined. Gramsci's concept of hegemony, defined here as the process by which relations of power are normalized for social members, generated a research trajectory in Cultural Studies (still with us today) that centers on identifying and analyzing systems of power embedded in processes of cultural production and consumption (to date, however, the emphasis has been heavily on consumption; see Curran, Morley, and Walkerdine, 1996, p. 3).⁴ The field is perhaps most noted for its now widely-accepted claim that consumers of cultural texts are not passive dupes but rather active participants in the creation of meaning:

Cultural studies has been . . . most interested in how groups with least power practically develop their own readings of, and uses for, cultural products – in fun, in resistance, or to articulate their own identity.

(During, 1993, p. 7)

Popular culture, in this view, is the culture of the subordinated as they actively resist their own subordination. "Popular culture is made by various factions of subordinated or disempowered people out of the resources . . . that are provided by the social system that disempowers them" (Fiske, 1989, pp. 1–2).

Cultural Studies' focus on textual consumption and moments of resistance broadened in the late 1980s and 1990s as scholars developed a "deepening concern to understand the values and strengths of the sense-making strategies used by ordinary people" in their everyday lives (Barker and Beezer, 1992, p. 8; see also Miller and McHoul, 1998). As the field becomes increasingly internationalized, the focus of inquiry has shifted to what During (1993) calls "the voices of the other," including marginalized peoples, post-colonial identities, and members of border cultures. The new Cultural Studies project is thus:

[A] project of thinking through the implications of extending the term "culture" to include activities and meanings of ordinary people, precisely those constituencies excluded from participation in culture when its elitist definition holds sway.

(Barker and Beezer, 1992, p. 5)

In contrast to Cultural Studies, the Production of Culture school focuses less attention on the various meanings of cultural texts and the process of cultural consumption than on an examination of culture as a manufactured product. Closely identified with the social sciences and the discipline of sociology in particular, the Production of Culture perspective originated in the US in the mid-1970s.⁵ An early theoretical precursor to this approach was the mid-1940s work of Theodor Adorno

and Max Horkheimer on what they termed “culture industries.”⁶ Adorno and Horkheimer argued that cultural objects are produced in much the same way as other industries produce other objects. The assembly-line production of cars, for example, is analogous to that of music or film. The standardization of production creates standardized and interchangeable cultural objects, which leads inevitably to standardization of consumption. Consumers are neither “active” nor “creative,” but instead are reduced to a homogeneous, undifferentiated mass, responding to cultural objects in a predictable, uniform manner (see Negus, 1997).

The contemporary Production of Culture approach moves beyond these somewhat pessimistic beginnings in its efforts to use “analytical systems from the sociology of occupations and of organizations to see how social resources are mobilized by artists, filmmakers, and the like to make cultural production possible” (Mukerji and Schudson, 1991, p. 28; see also Negus, 1997, p. 99). Scholars do not suggest that the production of culture can be reduced to economics alone, however. Rather, processes of production are themselves cultural phenomena and should be analyzed as such. “We need to understand the meanings that are given to both the ‘product’ and the practices through which the product is made” (Negus, 1997, p. 101; see also du Gay, 1997). By empirically examining group dynamics, the interactional order, social networks, and organizational decision-making, this perspective attempts to situate popular culture in concrete, identifiable social and economic processes and institutions (Mukerji and Schudson, 1991, p. 32).⁷

A third predominant perspective today is the Popular Culture Studies tradition, based in the United States and most closely associated with the work of Ray Browne and his colleagues in the Department of Popular Culture at Bowling Green State University (USA). The publication of the first issue of *Journal of Popular Culture* in 1969, the formation of the Popular Culture Association in 1970, and the creation of the Department of Popular Culture in 1972 were significant steps in the institutionalization of pop culture research in the American academy. Its practitioners define Popular Culture Studies as “the active and determined enlightened analysis of a culture’s culture with its strengths and weaknesses thoroughly understood” (Browne, 1996, p. 29). In this tradition, as in others, what constitutes the “popular” is defined very broadly:

Popular culture is the everyday culture of a group, large or small, of people . . . It is the way of life in which and by which most people in any society live . . . It is the everyday world around us . . . It is what we do while we are awake and how we do it . . . Popular culture studies are scholarly examinations of those everyday cultures.

(Browne, 1996, pp. 22, 25)

The primary goal of Popular Culture Studies since its inception has been to legitimize the study of pop culture in all fields of the humanities and social sciences. Scholars claim widespread success: “We in Popular Culture Studies have pioneered the way and opened up the territory to a vast new field of necessary understanding” (Browne, 1995, p. 25).

As this quote suggests, Popular Culture Studies sees itself as the “umbrella” field under which various theoretical, ideological, or disciplinary approaches to the study of pop culture, including Cultural Studies and the Production of Culture perspective,

are situated. In other words, to its practitioners, Popular Culture Studies is identified primarily through its subject matter. To study popular culture from any perspective is to participate in the Popular Culture Studies tradition, whether scholars recognize and acknowledge that participation or not. In a recent article Ray Browne takes the broader academic community to task for “co-opting” the tradition, and argues:

Popular Culture Studies should be . . . the mainframe of the computer system of human understanding which receives, coordinates and redistributes all efforts and accomplishments. (1995, p. 26)

In his view, Popular Culture Studies “is more important than individual fields” and needs to “incorporate all of them” (1995, p. 26). As we discuss below, however, there are significant differences in the way the Popular Culture Studies tradition understands its role and its mission, as compared to other perspectives, that might make such widespread incorporation difficult.

Issues and Debates

We turn now to a discussion of some of the key points of both convergence and debate within the broader field of popular culture scholarship. We do not mean to be exhaustive but rather offer the reader a general sense of some of the dominant themes in the literature. While there are considerably more areas of debate than consensus, most scholars – despite their differences in disciplinary location, theoretical stance, methodological approach and/or overall mission – can agree on a few key issues. First, scholars agree that popular culture both reflects *and* shapes broader social forces; it is a reciprocal process rather than a unidirectional one. Second, although scholars tend to draw upon their own disciplinary traditions to guide their work, they agree that popular culture research is, and should be, a multidisciplinary endeavor. Indeed, the range of perspectives brought to bear on the topic is astounding; as noted before, scholars throughout the Humanities, the Social Sciences, Schools of Leisure Studies, and Schools of Education are actively involved in pop culture research. Third, as a result, scholars support a diversity of methodological approaches to the study of popular culture. While disciplinary preferences or constraints shape how all scholars conduct research, there is general agreement that different modes of inquiry into popular culture generate meaningfully different questions, and thus meaningfully different results.

A final point of agreement, and perhaps the most significant, relates back to the question of how “pop culture” itself is defined. As social historians have documented, a discourse emerged in the late 1800s which distinguished elite or “highbrow” culture from mass or “lowbrow” culture.⁸ Elite cultural objects and practices are those favored by the socially privileged and well-educated, who are believed to be uniquely capable of understanding and appreciating them. Lowbrow or popular culture is essentially everything that is *not* elite culture. The designation of an object or practice as highbrow or lowbrow depends upon several interrelated variables. First is its degree of accessibility: the more accessible the object or practice the more likely it is to be labeled lowbrow. A second variable is the degree of emotional

“distance” adopted by consumers vis-à-vis the cultural text in question: a hyper-rational or “over-distanced” experience indicates highbrow cultural consumption whereas an overly-emotional or “under-distanced” experience signals lowbrow status (see Scheff, 1979). The final variable rests on whether the object or practice is identifiably authored: that is, traceable to a uniquely gifted creative genius. In general, authored texts are more likely to be considered highbrow than are unauthored ones. Scholars agree that distinctions between highbrow and lowbrow are made less for aesthetic reasons than political ones. According to Herbert Gans:

It is really about the nature of the good life, and thus about the purpose of life in general... It is also about which culture and whose culture should dominate in society... As such, the mass culture critique is an attack by one element of society against another.
(Gans, 1974, pp. 3–4)

Pierre Bourdieu concurs:

Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar... the most intolerable thing for those who regard themselves as the possessors of legitimate culture is the sacrilegious reuniting of tastes which taste dictates shall be separated.
(Bourdieu, 1984, pp. 6, 57)

The late 1960s marked the beginning of a significant trend: the gradual disintegration of high/low distinctions. Scholars from all perspectives now agree there is considerable fluidity between elite and mass culture. In other words, culture is a dynamic process rather than a static entity, and high/low distinctions can change over time, as can the social groups that engage them (also see Peterson and Kern, 1996). For example, silent movies are treated as “art” films today but were originally created for (and consumed by) a mass audience; a similar transformation occurred with Shakespeare’s plays (see Levine, 1988). As such, the categories of high and low are increasingly recognized as analytically imprecise. This is not to suggest, however, that issues of taste have been resolved. Cultural objects are rendered meaningful because of aesthetic valuation, and a key point of debate among scholars is whether it is appropriate, and if so, how to evaluate the aesthetic qualities of a product. Some believe that doing so passes judgment on the implied taste of its creators and consumers, and that the proper analytic approach is one of neutral objectivity. But is it plausible to remain neutral about issues of culture and taste? We all find issues of taste relevant to our everyday lived experiences. At the end of each semester, students enrolled in Lee’s soap opera class invariably confess they had expected the course to be easy because soap operas are so “trashy.” To their surprise, neither turns out to be true.

While there is considerable agreement about the questions addressed by the field of popular culture, there are at least three areas of ongoing debate: the origins of popular culture; the question of whether cultural consumers are active or passive; and as noted above, the question of whether it is appropriate for scholars to take an explicitly evaluative approach in conducting pop culture research. In the following

sections we outline each of these debates – but, we make no attempt to resolve them in this introductory chapter. It is our hope that the articles in this collection encourage and enable readers to examine these debates on their own.

What are the origins of popular culture? When, where and under what conditions did it emerge? Most scholars, particularly those in the Cultural Studies and Production of Culture traditions, believe that mass production (and thus mass distribution and mass consumption) was a necessary precursor to the emergence of a truly “popular” culture, and place its origins in the various transformations wrought by the Industrial Revolution in Western Europe and North America in the late 1800s. Popular Culture Studies scholars question this positioning, suggesting that research biases might obscure researchers from recognizing its true origins. Fred Schroeder (1980), for example, claims that our tendency to equate pop culture with various forms of mass entertainment (such as television, music and film) obscures our ability to recognize other objects and practices as “popular” (see also Browne, 1973). Relatedly, he suggests that our tendency to equate it with everything Western, especially everything “American,” obscures our ability to recognize its presence in other regions and cultures of the world. Finally, our tendency to equate mass production with factory or assembly-line production obscures our ability to legitimize earlier forms of production as, indeed, “mass.” In his edited collection titled *5000 Years of Popular Culture*, Schroeder (1980) recounts a visit to an Egyptian museum where he discovered an ancient clay mold from which figurines were produced for funerals and other spiritual practices. He writes:

Molds are the most obvious and least ambiguous of mass-production techniques. They are indicators of the alienation of creator from the product, and producer from consumer, and they are indicators of a metropolitan (i.e. “mother-city”) value system . . . I later observed similar molds from Tibet, and it became clear to me that I had found a technological connecting link to Sony radios, Coke bottles, penny-dreadfuls, the Bay Psalm Book and the Gutenberg Bible. I had discovered ancient popular culture.

(Schroeder, 1980, pp. 12, 4)

Thus, according to Schroeder, scholars’ recognition of their possible research biases might significantly expand the realm of what is typically considered “popular” culture.

A second area of debate concerns the question of whether pop culture is imposed from above by social elites for purposes of social control, or is truly created “by the people, for the people.” Most scholars writing in the mid-twentieth century believed that pop culture wholly reflected the interests and motivations of the dominant classes. In the most pessimistic reading of this perspective, usually termed the mass culture critique and associated with members of the Frankfurt school (including Adorno and Horkheimer, mentioned earlier), cultural consumers are completely pacified and homogenized in the process of consumption. As unquestioning recipients, consumers contribute nothing to the meaning of popular culture – and thus nothing to society at large – but instead are repetitively victimized and immobilized by it.⁹

Scholars writing today generally reject this perspective, but they disagree on the extent to which pop culture is instead an “authentic expression of the interests of the

people” (Ross, 1989, p. 4). Cultural Studies asserts that popular culture is neither totally imposed from above, nor something that emerges spontaneously from below, but rather is the outcome of an ongoing interplay between the processes of production and consumption (see Storey, 1993, p. 13). As noted earlier, however, Cultural Studies tends to focus heavily on consumers. John Fiske, for example, acknowledges that while the larger social system provides cultural resources to consumers (and benefits economically from the process of consumption), it is only consumers who can popularize objects or practices. In his view, the power, ultimately, is with the people:

Popular texts . . . are completed only when taken up by people and inserted into their everyday culture. The people make popular culture at the interface between everyday life and the consumption of the products of the cultural industries . . . Relevance can be produced only by the people, for only they can know which texts enable them to make the meanings that will function in their everyday lives. *(Fiske, 1989, p. 6)*

Others argue that we need to be cautious in applauding the apparent power of active audiences to generate their own cultural meanings, because this power is actually quite limited. In reference to media consumption Ien Ang writes:

audiences may be active in myriad ways using and interpreting media, but it would be utterly out of perspective to cheerfully equate “active” with “powerful,” in the sense of “taking control” at an enduring, structural, or institutional level. It is a perfectly reasonable starting point to consider people’s active negotiations with media texts and technologies as empowering in the context of their everyday lives . . . but we must not lose sight of the marginality of this power. *(Ang, 1990, p. 247)*

In sum, the extent to which “people make the popular” has yet to be resolved.

The final area of debate speaks back to the aesthetics of pop cultural objects and practice and centers on the question of whether academic scholars should approach issues of aesthetics in an evaluative or nonevaluative way. Sociologist Herbert Gans defines aesthetics as follows:

I use the term “aesthetic” broadly, referring not only to standards of beauty and taste but also to a variety of other emotional and intellectual values which people express or satisfy when they choose content from a culture. *(Gans, 1974, p. 14)*

In terms of the three approaches discussed here, only Cultural Studies seems explicitly involved in evaluative research. Its origins as an activist or politically transformative project render aesthetic evaluation a necessary element in the critical analysis of power relations in the processes of production and consumption. Popular Culture Studies, in contrast, espouses a non-evaluative approach, arguing that researchers should be neutral or objective in examining cultural texts and the people who produce and consume them. Since pop culture is defined as everyday culture, “liked or disliked, approved or disapproved . . . the question of aesthetics plays only a tangential and relatively unimportant role” (Browne, 1996, pp. 25, 33). What researchers might think of any given object, practice or process is irrelevant to their ability to describe and/or interpret it. Rollin (1975) goes further by arguing that

cultural evaluation is simply part of human nature. Making judgments about popular culture is thus inevitable:

And because it is inevitable it is unnecessary – unnecessary at least for the serious critic of Popular Culture, and unnecessary to the construction of a critical theory for Popular Culture . . . the only real authority concerning the “beauty” or “excellence” of a work of Popular Culture is the people . . . in Popular Culture, the rule is “one person – one vote.” However regrettable this may appear . . . it is a fact . . . Popular Art [thus] represents the triumph of a democratic aesthetic. (Rollin, 1975, p. 4, 5; *emphasis deleted*)

Rollin goes on to warn that aesthetic evaluations can in fact be damaging:

students of Popular Culture should be aware of the ways in which standards of aesthetic value can be transformed into moral imperatives which are then employed to celebrate some human beings and oppress others. (Rollin, 1975, p. 10)

Cultural Studies would probably agree with this statement but would argue that scholars should examine aesthetic standards precisely *because* they are embedded in relations of power. Negotiations between producers and consumers about “goodness” and “badness” are integral to the larger struggle over cultural meaning-making, and thus should be a key focus of empirical analysis.

The discipline of sociology, in which the Production of Culture perspective originated, is still attempting to articulate its position. In the early twentieth century, sociologists were centrally involved in aesthetic evaluation as part of their widespread critique of the “evils” of mass culture (see, for example, Blumer, 1933). Newer sociological approaches, in contrast, have avoided evaluative issues, and the Production of Culture perspective essentially ignores the issues of meaning-making and aesthetics altogether. “To the extent that aesthetics is addressed among scholars, it is as a dependent variable determined by market structure or industrial organization” (Bielby and Bielby, forthcoming, p. 4). This reluctance is based on sociologists’ erroneous belief that aesthetic judgment within popular culture is not empirically accessible. In the realm of elite culture, professional gatekeepers or mediators play a central role in deciphering and articulating a cultural object’s value to social members. In pop culture, in contrast, the accessibility of the cultural object pre-empts the traditional gatekeeping role.¹⁰ Instead, consumers articulate aesthetic values and make aesthetic judgments for themselves but since they are presumed to lack the critical capacity to do so they are granted little cultural authority. Consequently, sociologists treat most forms of popular culture as if they have no accessible aesthetic value at all. Bielby and Bielby suggest, however, that sociology can examine pop culture’s various aesthetic systems by beginning with the interpretations and meaning-making systems of consumers themselves. In terms of television they write:

Our point is that what makes a popular culture art form both “culture” and “popular” is that appreciation and evaluation are mediated by a widely shared and understood aesthetic, and both the art form and the aesthetic are accessible to an engaged audience that invests in acquiring the requisite knowledge without deferring to cultural authorities. (Bielby and Bielby, forthcoming, p. 22)

In short, while the Production of Culture approach sidesteps the issue, Bielby and Bielby argue that a complete sociological analysis of pop culture requires scholars to treat seriously the various ways consumers construct and maintain their own aesthetic systems.

The Circuit of Culture

This collection of readings is organized around the principle of connecting the worlds of cultural production and consumption. Common sense tells us that the popularity of any given cultural text, whether it be music or television or sport, is dependent upon an integrated relationship between producers and consumers. We learn little about singers unless we also study music-buyers; we learn little about television producers unless we also study television viewers. For ease of analysis, however, pop culture research tends to focus on only one dimension. The consumptionist trajectory of Cultural Studies and the productionist trajectory of Production of Culture scholars obscure linkages between the two processes:

[The] analytic splitting of production from consumption overstates the interpretive control exercised by consumers and understates the power of the culture industries to limit what is made available for interpretation. (Traube, 1996, p. xii)

To connect production and consumption we borrow the conceptual image of a *circuit of culture*, which suggests that cultural meaning-making functions less in terms of a “transmission flow” model from producer to consumer “and more like the model of a dialogue. It is an ongoing process” (du Gay, 1997, p. 10; see also du Gay et al. 1997). Cultural meanings are produced at a number of different sites and are circulated through a complex set of reciprocal processes and practices. While production and consumption are key sites for meaning-making, other sites serve important intermediary functions.¹¹ Advertising, for example, “both articulates production with consumption, and draws consumption back into the process of production.” Advertising thus constitutes its own moment in the circuit of culture: the moment of circulation (Nixon, 1997, p. 10).

According to du Gay and his colleagues (1997), there are at least five major cultural processes that should be emphasized in studying the circuit of culture, including representation, identity, production, consumption, and regulation. To study an object or text culturally, “one should at least explore how it is represented, what social identities are associated with it, how it is produced and consumed, and what mechanisms regulate its distribution and use” (du Gay et al., 1997, p. 3). In analyzing the circuit one can begin with any moment or site that one chooses; while they might appear to be distinct categories, they overlap and articulate with one another in myriad ways.

This collection of readings is designed to encourage and facilitate this understanding of cultural meaning-making as dialectical. Readings were selected to cover a variety of sites in the circuit of culture and to explore key themes and debates about the relationship between them. The readings reflect the richly diverse history of pop culture scholarship in that they are situated in a broad spectrum of theoretical and

disciplinary perspectives. The collection is organized into five distinct sections. Part I explores the meaning of the term “popular” through a range of cultural texts including music, comics, sport, and art. This section aims to introduce readers to the variety of objects and practices that constitute the popular and to the range of scholarly perspectives that might be used to study them. Parts II and III focus explicitly on the two key sites in the circuit of culture: production and consumption. We encourage students to read across these two sections very carefully. Part II explores how mass culture is commodified and asks who profits (and loses) from that commodification. Included here are analyses of art, advertising, alternative rock, and the post-modern city. Part III examines cultural consumption, focusing on the ongoing tension between producers and consumers over the generation of cultural meaning. This section opens with a classic piece on encoding and decoding meaning in cultural texts, a process further explored through an article on pornography and three different articles on music. Part IV returns to the key element of cultural texts as explored in the first section but focuses on several new issues. The first article introduces and explores the concept of formula or genre. The articles on literature translation and music sampling address the authorship of cultural texts; as noted earlier, determinations of authorship are central in the social “worth” awarded a cultural object (i.e. highbrow/lowbrow status). The two articles on television illustrate the complexity of textual meanings and the role of the text in the circuit of culture. Finally, Part V focuses on celebrity and fandom through readings on the emergence of the concept of celebrity in America, the meanings/readings of country music legend Dolly Parton, and through two articles on the uneasy role of fans in the generation of cultural meaning. The readings in Part V are included because they concretize or materialize the circuit of culture. They illustrate that celebrity is a manufactured product (one site in the circuit) which necessarily depends on distribution and circulation (a second site) and the patronage of fan-consumers (a third site) to maintain celebrity status. The celebrity-fan relationship, in other words, might be said to literally embody the circuit of culture.¹²

The essays collected here include some of the “classics” in pop culture scholarship, more recently published selections from scholarly books and journals, and several new pieces solicited especially for this book. Readers will note that the essays emphasize various forms of mass entertainment (rather than other types of cultural content), reflect a mostly Western perspective, and are situated in contemporary (rather than historical) cultural arenas. However, we hope that readers in all areas of popular culture find this collection useful for their scholarship, teaching and learning.

Notes

- 1 Some believe this particular understanding of the term is justification enough for why pop culture should be studied in the academy. In this view, popularity is a significant indicator of the cultural mindset of the times, “the popularity of a given cultural element (object, person or event) is directly proportional to the degree to which that element is reflective of audience beliefs and values. The *greater* the popularity of the cultural element – in an era and/or over time – the *more* reflective of the zeitgeist this element is likely to be” (Nachbar and Lause

- 1992, p. 5; emphasis in original). Studying pop culture is important, then, because it tells us something significant about ourselves and our culture more broadly.
- 2 Today, however, literary studies has fully embraced pop culture research, especially within the Cultural Studies tradition.
 - 3 See Mukerji and Schudson (1991) for an excellent discussion of the disciplinary origins of popular culture research.
 - 4 To expand, Gramsci's work explores the ways that dominant classes rule without employing direct force. "The question to which 'hegemony' is an answer is, 'Why do dominated or oppressed groups accept their position in the social hierarchy?' Gramsci held that, in fact, oppressed groups accept the definition of the world of elites as common sense; their understanding of how the world works, then, leads them to collaborate in their own oppression" (Mukerji and Schudson, 1991, p. 15).
 - 5 Keith Negus (1997) dates the emergence of this perspective to the 1976 publication of Richard Peterson's edited collection, *The Production of Culture* (London: Sage). Particularly influential was the chapter by Peterson himself titled "The production of culture: A Prolegomenon."
 - 6 Adorno and Horkheimer, along with other members of what has been termed the Frankfurt school, were extremely influential in the development of Cultural Studies as well.
 - 7 As Mukerji and Schudson point out, however, there are several potential drawbacks to this approach. First, the production of culture perspective is "much better at explaining the normal mechanisms for creating 'normal' culture than it is at explaining what happens when culture changes." Furthermore, this approach has a tendency to "assume that sociological factors are more determining than, in fact, they are." Finally, and perhaps more importantly, production of culture studies "assume that they study the production of 'culture.' They do not. They study the production of cultural objects, and these objects become a part of and contribute to culture. But they are not culture as such" (Mukerji and Schudson 1991, pp. 32–3).
 - 8 There is some debate about when this distinction first occurred. Herbert Gans (1974) claims it emerged about 200 years ago in most modern societies when daily life was first divided into "work" time and "leisure" time. Other scholars argue that the late nineteenth century and the transformations heralded by the Industrial Revolution (e.g. mass production/distribution/consumption) first allowed for the distinction to be made. Levine (1988) traces the first appearance of the term "highbrow" to the late 1880s, and the term "lowbrow" to shortly after 1900 (see also Cullen 1996).
 - 9 Writing in the mid-1970s, Herbert Gans suggests there are four major themes in most mass culture critiques. The first concerns the "negative character of popular culture creation" (i.e. pop culture is mass produced and is purely for-profit). The second addresses the "negative effects on high culture" (i.e. pop culture "steals" from high culture and thus debases it). The third theme focuses on the "negative effects on the popular culture audience" (as noted, mass culture critics believe popular culture is narcotizing and harmful to its consumers). A final theme is the potentially "negative effects on the society" (i.e. pop culture consumption reduces the level of civilization, and since it encourages consumer passivity, also encourages totalitarianism) (Gans 1974, p. 19).
 - 10 While there are obviously professional critics of popular cultural forms, particularly forms of mass entertainment, they are not presumed to be "necessary" in terms of consumers' ability to understand and appreciate an object or practice. In elite culture, in contrast, the critics' role is believed essential to the meaning-making process.
 - 11 DuGay and his colleagues address how the cultural economy links production and consumption, specifically through the processes of representation, identity, and regulation. By broadening conceptualization of how production and consumption occur, du Gay attends

- to cultures of meaning and the identities which create them. Griswold's (1994) "cultural diamond" also considers the relationship between cultural objects and the social world. She identifies four elements: creators, cultural objects, recipients, and the social world. However, Griswold's schema is an accounting device that does not specify the content of the relationships among any of the elements. She makes clear that her schema is neither a theory nor a model of culture because it does not indicate cause and effect.
- 12 Marshall (1997) suggests that celebrities are manufactured commodities; using a Marxian metaphor, he suggests they have no use value in contemporary culture but instead are pure exchange value. In contrast to this conceptualization, we argue that celebrities embody the circuit of culture as a whole.

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