



培文书系 · 人文科学系列



Cultural Theory and Popular Culture

An Introduction

文化原理 与通俗文化导论

第三版



[英] 约翰·斯托里 著
John Storey



北京大学出版社
PEKING UNIVERSITY PRESS



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Preface to First Edition

As the title of this book indicates, my subject is the relationship between cultural theory and popular culture. But as the title also indicates, my study is intended as an *introduction* to the subject. This has entailed the adoption of a particular approach. I have not tried to write a history of the encounter between cultural theory and popular culture. Instead, I have chosen to focus on the theoretical and methodological implications and ramifications of specific moments in the history of the study of popular culture. In short, I have tended to treat cultural theory/popular culture as a discursive formation, and to focus less on historical provenance and more on how it functions ideologically in the present. To avoid misunderstanding and misrepresentation, I have allowed critics and theorists, when and where appropriate, to speak in their own words. In doing this, I am in agreement with the view expressed by the American literary historian Walter E. Houghton: 'Attitudes are elusive. Try to define them and you lose their essence, their special colour and tone. They have to be apprehended in their concrete and living formulation'.¹ Moreover, rather than simply survey the field, I have tried through quotation and detailed commentary to give the student of popular culture a 'taste' of the material. However, this book is not intended as a substitute for reading first hand the theorists and critics discussed here.² And, although each chapter ends with suggestions for further reading, these are intended to supplement the reading of the primary texts discussed in the individual chapters (details of which are located in the Notes at the end of the book).

Above all, the intention of this book is to provide an introduction to the academic study of popular culture. As I have already indicated, I am under no illusion that this is a *fully* adequate account, or the only possible way to map the conceptual landscape that is the subject of this study. My hope is that this version of the relationship between popular culture and cultural theory will encourage other students of popular culture to begin their own mapping of the field.

Finally, I hope I have written a book that can offer something to both those familiar with the subject and those to whom – as an academic subject at least – it is all very new.

Preface to Second Edition

In writing the second edition I have sought to improve and to expand the material in the first book. To achieve this I have revised and I have rewritten. More specifically, I have added new sections on popular culture and the carnivalesque, postmodernism and the pluralism of value. I have also extended five sections, Neo-Gramscian cultural studies, Popular film, cine-psychoanalysis and cultural studies, Feminism as reading, Postmodernism in the 1960s, the cultural field.

Preface to Third Edition

In writing the third edition I have sought to improve and to expand the material in the first two editions of this book. To achieve this I have revised and I have rewritten; much more extensively than in the second edition. I have also added new material to most of the chapters (the book has grown from a first edition of around 65,000 words to a third edition in excess of 100,000 words). This is most evident in the renamed, and reorganised, Chapter 6, where I have added a new section on Queer Theory, and where I have extended the section on Reading Women's Magazines. Perhaps the most visible change is the addition of illustrations, and the inclusion of a list of web sites useful to the student of cultural theory and popular culture.

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for Kate and Jenny

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1 □ *What is Popular Culture?*

Before we consider in detail the different ways in which popular culture has been defined and analyzed, I want to outline some of the general features of the debate which the study of popular culture has generated. It is not my intention to pre-empt the specific findings and arguments which will be presented in the following chapters. Here I simply wish to map out the general conceptual landscape of popular culture. This is, in many ways, a daunting task. As Tony Bennett points out, 'as it stands, the concept of popular culture is virtually useless, a melting pot of confused and contradictory meanings capable of misdirecting inquiry up any number of theoretical blind alleys'.¹ Part of the difficulty stems from the implied *otherness* which is always absent/present when we use the term 'popular culture'. As we shall see in the chapters which follow, popular culture is always defined, implicitly or explicitly, in contrast to other conceptual categories: folk culture, mass culture, dominant culture, working-class culture, etc. A full definition must always take this into account. Moreover, as we shall also see, whichever conceptual category is deployed as popular culture's absent/present *other*, it will always powerfully affect the connotations brought into play when we use the term 'popular culture'.

Therefore, to study popular culture we must first confront the difficulty posed by the term itself. That is, 'depending on how it is used, quite different areas of inquiry and forms of theoretical definition and analytical focus are suggested'.² The main argument which I suspect readers will take from this book is that popular culture is in effect an *empty* conceptual category, one which can be filled in a wide variety of often conflicting ways, depending on the context of use.

Culture

In order to define popular culture we first need to define the term 'culture'. Raymond Williams calls culture 'one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language'.³ Williams suggests three broad definitions. First of all, culture can be used to refer to 'a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic

development'.⁴ We could, for example, speak about the cultural development of Western Europe and be referring only to intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic factors – great philosophers, great artists and great poets. This would be a perfectly understandable formulation. A second use of the word 'culture' might be to suggest 'a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period or a group'.⁵ Using this definition, if we speak of the cultural development of Western Europe, we would have in mind not just intellectual and aesthetic factors, but the development of literacy, holidays, sport, religious festivals. Finally, Williams suggests that culture can be used to refer to 'the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity'.⁶ In other words, those texts and practices whose principal function is to signify, to produce or to be the occasion for the production of meaning. Culture in this third definition is synonymous with what structuralists and post-structuralists call 'signifying practices' (see Chapter 4). Using this definition, we would probably think of examples such as poetry, the novel, ballet, opera, fine art. To speak of popular culture usually means to mobilize the second and third meanings of the word 'culture'. The second meaning – culture as a particular way of life – would allow us to speak of such practices as the seaside holiday, the celebration of Christmas, and youth subcultures, as examples of culture. These are usually referred to as *lived* cultures or cultural practices. The third meaning – culture as signifying practices – would allow us to speak of soap opera, pop music, and comics, as examples of culture. These are usually referred to as cultural texts. Few people would imagine Williams's first definition when thinking about popular culture.

Ideology

Before we turn to the different definitions of popular culture, there is another term we have to think about: ideology. Ideology is a crucial concept in the study of popular culture. Graeme Turner calls it 'the most important conceptual category in cultural studies'.⁷ James Carey has even suggested that 'British cultural studies could be described just as easily and perhaps more accurately as ideological studies'.⁸ Like culture, ideology has many competing meanings. An understanding of this concept is often complicated by the fact that in much cultural analysis the concept is used interchangeably with culture itself, and especially popular culture. However, although ideology has been used to address the same terrain as culture and popular culture, the terms are not quite synonymous. As Stuart Hall suggests, 'Something is left over when one says "ideology" and something is not present when one says "culture"'.⁹ The conceptual space to which Hall refers is of course politics. The fact that ideology has been used to refer to the same conceptual terrain as culture and popular culture, makes it an important term in any understanding of the nature of popular culture. What follows is a brief discussion of just five of the many meanings of the concept of ideology. We will consider only those meanings which have a bearing on the study of popular culture.

First of all, ideology can refer to a systematic body of ideas articulated by a particular group of people. For example, we could speak of 'professional ideology' to refer to the ideas which inform the practices of particular professional groups. We could also speak of the 'ideology of the Labour Party'. Here we would be referring to the collection of political, economic and social ideas which inform the aspirations and activities of the Party. A second definition suggests a certain masking, distortion, concealment. Ideology is used here to indicate how some cultural texts and practices present distorted images of reality. They produce what is called 'false consciousness'.¹⁰ Such distortions, it is argued, work in the interests of the powerful against the interests of the powerless. Using this definition, we might speak of capitalist ideology. What would be intimated by this use would be the way in which ideology conceals the reality of domination from those in power: the dominant class do not see themselves as exploiters or oppressors. And, perhaps more importantly, the way in which ideology conceals the reality of subordination from those who are powerless: the subordinate classes do not see themselves as oppressed or exploited. This definition derives from certain assumptions about the circumstances of the production of cultural texts and practices. It is argued that they are the superstructural 'reflections' or 'expressions' of the power relations of the economic base of society. This is one of the fundamental assumptions of classical Marxism. Here is Karl Marx's famous formulation:

In the social production of their existence men enter into definite, necessary relations, which are independent of their will, namely, relations of production corresponding to a determinate stage of development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation on which there arises a legal and political superstructure and to which there correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but on the contrary it is their social being that determines their consciousness.¹¹

What Marx is suggesting is that the way a society organizes the means of its economic production will have a determining effect on the type of culture that society produces, makes possible. The cultural products of this so-called base/superstructure relationship are deemed ideological to the extent that, as a result of this relationship, they implicitly or explicitly support the interests of the dominant groups who, socially, politically, economically and culturally, benefit from the economic organization of society. In Chapter 5, we will consider the modifications made by Marx and Frederick Engels themselves to this formulation, and the way in which subsequent Marxists have further modified what has come to be regarded by many cultural critics as a rather mechanistic account of what we might call the social relations of culture and popular culture. However, having said this, it is nevertheless the case that

acceptance of the contention that the flow of causal traffic within society is unequally structured, such that the economy, in a privileged way, influences political and ideological relationships in ways that are not true in reverse, has usually been held to constitute a 'limit position' for Marxism. Abandon this claim, it is argued, and Marxism ceases to be Marxism.¹²

We can also use ideology in this general sense to refer to power relations outside those of class. For instance, feminists speak of the power of patriarchal ideology, and how it operates to conceal, mask and distort gender relations in our society. It is ideological not because it presents lies about gender relations, but because it presents partial truths as the whole truth. Its very power depends on its capacity to confuse any distinction between the two.

A third definition of ideology (closely related to, and in some ways dependent on, the second definition) uses the term to refer to 'ideological forms'.¹³ This usage is intended to draw attention to the way in which texts (television fiction, pop songs, novels, feature films, etc.) always present a particular image of the world. This definition depends on a notion of society as conflictual rather than consensual. Texts are said to take sides, consciously or unconsciously, in this conflict. The German playwright Bertolt Brecht summarizes the point: 'Good or bad, a play always includes an image of the world. . . . There is no play and no theatrical performance which does not in some way affect the dispositions and conceptions of the audience. Art is never without consequences.'¹⁴ Brecht's point can be generalized to apply to all cultural texts. Another way of saying this would be simply to argue that all texts are ultimately political. That is, they offer competing ideological significations of the way the world is or should be. Popular culture is thus, as Hall claims, a site where 'collective social understandings are created'; a terrain on which 'the politics of signification' are played out in attempts to win readers to particular ways of seeing the world.¹⁵

A fourth definition is one that was very influential in the 1970s and early 1980s. It is the definition of ideology developed by the French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser. We shall discuss Althusser in more detail in Chapter 5. Here I will simply outline some key points about one of his definitions of ideology. Althusser's main contention is to see ideology not simply as a body of ideas, but as a material practice. What he means by this is that ideology is encountered in the practices of everyday life and not simply in certain ideas about everyday life. Principally, what Althusser has in mind is the way in which certain rituals and customs have the effect of binding us to the social order; a social order which is marked by enormous inequalities of wealth, status and power. Using this definition, we could describe the seaside holiday or the celebration of Christmas as examples of ideological practices. This would point to the way in which they offer pleasure and release from the usual demands of the social order, but that, ultimately, they return us to our places in the social order, refreshed and ready to tolerate our exploitation and oppression until the next official break comes along. In this sense, ideology works to reproduce the social conditions and social relations

necessary for the economic conditions and economic relations of capitalism to continue.

A fifth definition of ideology is one associated with the early work of the French cultural theorist Roland Barthes (discussed in more detail in Chapter 4). Barthes argues that ideology operates mainly at the level of connotations, the secondary, often unconscious meanings that texts and practices carry, or can be made to carry. Ideology (or 'myth' as Barthes himself calls it) is the terrain on which takes place a hegemonic struggle to restrict connotations, to fix particular connotations, to produce new connotations. An example should make clear what Barthes has in mind. A Conservative Party political broadcast transmitted in 1990 ended with the word 'socialism' being transposed into red prison bars. What was being suggested is that the socialism of the Labour Party is synonymous with social, economic and political imprisonment. The broadcast was attempting to fix the connotations of the word 'socialism'. Moreover, it hoped to locate socialism in a binary relationship in which it connoted unfreedom, whilst conservatism connoted freedom. For Barthes, this would be a classic example of the operations of ideology, the attempt to make universal and legitimate what is in fact partial and particular; an attempt to pass off that which is cultural as something which is natural. Similarly, it could be argued that in British society white, masculine, heterosexual, middle class, are unmarked in the sense that they are the 'normal', the 'natural', the 'universal', from which other ways of being are an inferior variation on an original. This is made clear in such formulations as a female pop singer, a black journalist, a working-class writer, a gay comedian. In each instance the first term is used to qualify the second as a deviation from the 'universal' categories of pop singer, journalist, writer and comedian.

So far we have briefly examined different ways of defining culture and ideology. What should be clear by now is that culture and ideology do cover much the same conceptual landscape. The main difference between them is that ideology brings a political dimension to the shared terrain. In addition, the introduction of the concept of ideology suggests that the culture/ideology landscape is inescapably marked by relations of power and politics. It suggests that the study of popular culture amounts to something more than a simple discussion of entertainment and leisure.¹⁶

Popular Culture

There are various ways to define popular culture. This book is of course in part about that very process, about the different ways in which various critical approaches have attempted to fix the meaning of popular culture. Therefore, all I intend to do for the remainder of this chapter is to sketch out six definitions of popular culture which in their different, general ways, inform the study of popular culture. But first a few words about the term 'popular'. Williams suggests four current meanings: 'well liked by many people'; 'inferior kinds of work'; 'work deliberately setting out to win favour with the people'; 'culture actually made by

the people for themselves'.¹⁷ Clearly, then, any definition of popular culture will bring into play a complex combination of the different meanings of the term 'culture' with the different meanings of the term 'popular'. The history of cultural theory's engagement with popular culture is, therefore, a history of the different ways in which the two terms have been connected by theoretical labour within particular historical and social contexts.

An obvious starting point in any attempt to define popular culture is to say that popular culture is simply culture which is widely favoured or well liked by many people. And undoubtedly, such a quantitative index would meet the approval of many people. We could examine sales of books, sales of CDs and videos. We could also examine attendance records at concerts, sporting events, festivals. We could also scrutinize market research figures on audience preferences for different television programmes. Such counting would undoubtedly tell us a great deal. The difficulty might prove to be that, paradoxically, it tells us too much. Unless we can agree on a figure over which something becomes popular culture, and below which it is just culture, we might find that widely favoured or well liked by many people included so much as to be virtually useless as a conceptual definition of popular culture. Despite this problem, what is clear is that any definition of popular culture must include a quantitative dimension. The *popular* of popular culture would seem to demand it. What is also clear, however, is that on its own, a quantitative index is not enough to provide an adequate definition of popular culture. Such counting would almost certainly include 'the officially sanctioned "high culture" which in terms of book and record sales and audience ratings for television dramatisations of the classics, can justifiably claim to be "popular" in this sense'.¹⁸

A second way of defining popular culture is to suggest that it is the culture which is left over after we have decided what is high culture. Popular culture, in this definition, is a residual category, there to accommodate cultural texts and practices which fail to meet the required standards to qualify as high culture. In other words, it is a definition of popular culture as inferior culture. What the culture/popular culture test might include is a range of value judgements on a particular cultural text or practice. For example, we might want to insist on formal complexity. We might also want to suggest that moral worth is a fitting method of judgement. Other cultural critics might want to argue that in the end it all comes down to the critical insight provided by a text or practice. To be culturally worthwhile it has to be difficult. Being difficult ensures its exclusive status as high culture. Its very difficulty literally excludes; it guarantees the exclusivity of its audience. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu argues that cultural distinctions of this kind are often used to support class distinctions. Taste is a deeply ideological category: it functions as a marker of 'class' (using the term in a double sense to mean both a social economic category and the suggestion of a particular level of quality). For Bourdieu, the consumption of culture is 'predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfil a social function of legitimating social differences' (see Chapter 8).¹⁹ Such distinctions are often supported by claims that popular culture is mass-produced commercial culture, whereas high culture is the result of an individual act of