Cultural Studies and the Study of Popular Culture

SECOND EDITION

John Storey

CULTURAL STUDIES AND THE STUDY OF POPULAR CULTURE

Second edition

John Storey

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PREFACE TO SECOND EDITION

Cultural Studies and the Study of Popular Culture, second edition, is a revised, rewritten and expanded version of the first edition.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all those who have contributed, knowingly and unknowingly, to the writing of this book, especially family, friends, colleagues, and students (past and present). I would particularly like to thank Jenny Storey for her help and support throughout. Finally, I would like to thank Louise Baranski: just by being there you make everything better.

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1

CULTURAL STUDIES AND THE STUDY OF POPULAR CULTURE: AN INTRODUCTION

The aim of this book is twofold: first, to introduce students and other interested readers to the study of contemporary popular culture; and second, to suggest a map of the development of British cultural studies through a discussion of a range of theories and methods for the study of popular culture. I have not attempted an elaborate mapping of the field. Rather, my aim has been to bring together under discussion a range of approaches which have made a significant contribution to the development of the cultural studies approach to the study of contemporary popular culture. It is hoped the book will provide a useful introduction – and range of *usable* theories and methods – for students new to the field, and a critical overview for those more familiar with the procedures and politics of cultural studies.[1]

CULTURAL STUDIES AND POPULAR CULTURE

Cultural studies is not a monolithic body of theories and methods. Stuart Hall (1992) makes this very clear:

> Cultural Studies has multiple discourses; it has a number of different histories. It is a whole set of formations; it has its own different conjunctures and moments in the past. It included

> many different kinds of work . . . It always was a set of unstable formations . . . It had many trajectories; many people had and have different theoretical positions, all of them in contention. (278)

Cultural studies has always been an unfolding discourse, responding to changing historical and political conditions and always marked by debate, disagreement and intervention. For example, in the late 1970s the centrality of class in cultural studies was disrupted first by feminism's insistence on the importance of gender, and then by black students raising questions about the invisibility of 'race' in much cultural studies analysis. It is simply not possible *now* to think of cultural studies and popular culture, for example, without also thinking about the enormous contribution to the study of popular culture made by feminism. In the early 1970s, such a connection would have been far from obvious.

Although it is possible to point to degree programmes, to journals, to conferences and to academic associations, there is no simple answer to the question, *what is British cultural studies?* The problem is that so much of British cultural studies is not in origin British; it comes from, for example, France (Louis Althusser, Roland Barthes, Pierre Bourdieu, Michel de Certeau, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan), Austria (Sigmund Freud), Germany (Karl Marx), Italy (Antonio Gramsci), Russia (Mikhail Bakhtin, Valentin Volosinov), Switzerland (Ferdinand de Saussure). Therefore, although British cultural studies tends to be associated with the work of Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, E. P. Thompson, and Stuart Hall,[2] the various 'appropriations' of work from outside the UK make this position not as straightforward as it might at first appear.

Cultural studies works with an inclusive definition of culture. That is, it is a 'democratic' project in the sense that rather than study only what Matthew Arnold called 'the best which has been thought and said' (Arnold 1998, F. R. Leavis 1998), cultural studies is committed to examining *all* that has been thought and said (although in practice, as I will shortly discuss, most effort has been focused on popular culture). To put it simply, culture is how we live nature (including our own biology); it is the shared meanings we

make and encounter in our everyday lives. Culture is not something essential, embodied in particular 'texts' (that is, any commodity, object or event that can be made to signify), it is the practices and processes of making meanings with and from the 'texts' we encounter in our everyday lives.[3] In this way, then, cultures are made from the production, circulation and consumption of meanings. To share a culture, therefore, is to interpret the world – make it meaningful – in recognisably similar ways.

To see culture as the practices and processes of making shared meanings does not mean that cultural studies believes that cultures are harmonious, organic wholes. On the contrary, cultural studies maintains that the 'texts' from which cultures are made are 'multi-accentual' (Volosinov 1973). That is, they can be made to mean in many different ways. Given this, conflict over making the world mean – insisting on the 'right' meaning(s) – is almost inevitable. It is this conflict – the relations between culture and power – which is the core interest of cultural studies. How cultural studies thinks of the relations between culture and power is informed most often by the work of Antonio Gramsci and Michel Foucault. As Stuart Hall observed in one of the foundational essays of British cultural studies, 'Foucault and Gramsci between them account for much of the most productive work on concrete analysis now being undertaken in the field' (Hall 1996a). Although Hall wrote this in 1980, and between then and now cultural studies has been influenced by (and has in turn influenced) feminism, post-structuralism, post-colonial theory, psychoanalysis, postmodernism, and queer theory, I would argue that the work of Gramsci and Foucault is still fundamental to cultural studies as it is practised in the UK.

The introduction of Gramsci's concept of 'hegemony' (Gramsci 1971) into British cultural studies in the early 1970s brought about a rethinking of popular culture (Storey 2001). It did this in two ways. First of all it produced a rethinking of the politics of popular culture; popular culture was now seen as a key site for the production and reproduction of hegemony. Capitalist industrial societies are societies divided unequally in terms of, for example, ethnicity, gender, generation, sexuality and social class. Cultural studies argues that popular culture is one of the principal sites where these divisions are

established and contested; that is, popular culture is an arena of struggle and negotiation between the interests of dominant groups and the interests of subordinate groups. Working within the framework of hegemony, Hall deploys the concept of 'articulation' (Hall 1982, 1996b) to explain the processes of ideological struggle.[4] Hall's use plays on the term's double meaning to express and connect: first, it is an 'articulation' in that meaning has to be expressed (the 'text' has to be made to signify); second, it is an 'articulation' in that meaning is always expressed in a specific context (connected to another context and the 'text' could be made to signify something quite different). A 'text', therefore, is not the issuing source of meaning, but a site where the articulation of meaning – variable meaning(s) – can be made. And because 'texts' are 'multi-accentual', they can be articulated with different 'accents' by different people in different contexts for different politics. In this way, then, meaning, and the field of culture more generally, is always a site of negotiation and conflict; an arena in which hegemony may be won or lost (Hall 1998).

The introduction of hegemony into British cultural studies also produced a rethinking of the concept of popular culture itself (Hall 1996a, Storey 2001). This rethinking involved bringing into active relationship two previously dominant but antagonistic ways of thinking about popular culture. The first tradition viewed popular culture as a culture imposed by the capitalist culture industries; a culture provided for profit and ideological manipulation (i.e. the Frankfurt School, structuralism, some versions of post-structuralism, political economy). This is popular culture as 'structure'. The second tradition saw popular culture as a culture spontaneously emerging from below; an 'authentic' folk, working-class or subculture – the 'voice' of the people (i.e. some versions of culturalism, social history and 'history from below'). This is popular culture as 'agency'. From the perspective of the cultural studies appropriation of hegemony, however, popular culture is neither an 'authentic' folk, working-class or subculture, nor a culture simply imposed by the capitalist culture industries, but a 'compromise equilibrium' (Gramsci 1971) between the two; a contradictory mix of forces from both 'below' and 'above'; both 'commercial' and 'authentic', marked by

both 'resistance' and 'incorporation', 'structure' and 'agency'. Therefore, although a primary interest for cultural studies is the investigation of how people make culture from and with the commodities made available by the capitalist culture industries, working with the concept of hegemony is always to insist that such research should never lose sight of the conditions of existence which both enable and constrain practices of consumption. In every decade in the history of cultural studies the point has been repeatedly made. It is the 'Gramscian insistence', before (Storey 2001), with and after Gramsci, learned from Marx (Marx 1977), that we make culture and we are made by culture; there is agency and there is structure. It is not enough to celebrate agency; nor is it enough to detail the structure(s) of power; we must always keep in mind the dialectical play between agency and structure, between production and consumption. A consumer, situated in a specific social context, always confronts a 'text' in its material existence as a result of particular conditions of production. But in the same way, a 'text' is confronted by a consumer, situated in a specific social context, who appropriates as culture, and 'produces in use' the range of possible meanings the 'text' can be made to bear – these cannot just be read off from the materiality of a 'text', or from the means or relations of its production (Hall 1980, Morley 1980, Du Gay et al. 1997). Working with hegemony may at times appear to lead to a certain celebration of the lived cultures of working people, but such celebration is always made in the full knowledge that what in one context is 'resistance' can become in another 'incorporation' (Storey 1999, 2001).

Whereas the appropriation of Gramsci usually leads to a focus on the relations between production and consumption, the deployment of Foucault tends to generate work on representation, especially on the 'productive' nature of representation. Cultural studies takes a constructionist approach to representation (Hall 1997). Because things do not signify by themselves, what they mean has to be 'represented' in and through culture. That is, representation (through processes of description, conceptualisation and substitution) constructs the meaning of what is represented. The world certainly exists outside representation, but it is only in representa-

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tions that the world can be made meaningful. Representation is, therefore, a practice through which we make reality meaningful and through which we share and contest meanings of ourselves, of each other, and of the world.

If meaning is not something fixed and guaranteed in nature, but is the result of particular ways of representing nature in culture, then the meaning of something can never be fixed, final or true; its meaning will only ever be contextual and contingent and, moreover, always open to the changing relations of power. From a Foucauldian perspective (as developed in British cultural studies), representation always takes place in a discourse, which organises what can and cannot be said about a particular 'text'. Again, this is not to deny that the world exists in all its materiality but to insist that it is made meaningful in discourse (Foucault 1972). Meaning is made in discourses and, moreover, it is here that 'power produces knowledge . . . power and knowledge directly imply one another . . . there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations' (Foucault 1979: 27). Dominant ways of knowing the world – making it meaningful – produced by those with the power to make their ways of knowing circulate discursively in the world, generate 'regimes of truth' (Foucault 2001a), which come to assume an authority over the ways in which we think and act; that is, provide us with 'subject positions' from which meanings can be made and actions carried out (Foucault 2001b). Cultural studies (following Foucault) seeks to discover 'how men [and women] govern (themselves and others) by the production of truth (. . . the establishment of domains in which the practice of true and false can be made at once ordered and pertinent)' (Foucault 2001a: 230). The power entangled in representation, therefore, is not a negative force, it is productive: 'We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it "excludes", it "represses", it "censors", it "abstracts", it "masks", it "conceals". In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth' (Foucault 1979: 194). This makes representation a key concept in cultural studies' focus on the relations between culture and power.

MORE ABOUT THIS BOOK

My aim, as stated earlier, is to present a range of theories and methods which have been used within cultural studies to study contemporary popular culture. In the main, I have tried to keep criticisms of the theories and methods to a minimum. I have, therefore, tried to avoid 'opinion writing', where, instead of explaining a theory or method, the author continually clutters his or her account with talk of problems and how he or she would solve them or would do the whole thing differently. There is, of course, a place for such an approach, but I am not convinced that the appropriate place is an introductory text. I would like the reader to take from this book an understanding of a range of significant theories and methods, rather than an understanding of what I think about them. Now it may, at times, become obvious what I think, but this should not be the primary knowledge that the reader takes from the book. For much the same reasons, I have quoted more than would be appropriate in a more 'advanced' text. But I feel quite strongly that introductory texts work best when they give their readers reasonable access to the theories and theorists under discussion.

I am also aware that I have simplified the field. Selection always means exclusion; and I know that my selection will not meet with universal approval. There are other valuable theories and methods which I have not discussed. In my defence, I can say only that it is not possible in a book of this size to cover all the theories and methods which have influenced cultural studies or which form part of its very structure. I have, however, selected the approaches which *I* believe are most significant.

In conclusion, it is difficult to do full justice to the complexities of the theories and methods that I have discussed. Really to do justice to the range and diversity of the study of contemporary popular culture within cultural studies would be the work of more than one book. Finally, whatever else this book is, it is certainly not intended as a substitute for reading firsthand the theories and methods discussed.

NOTES

1. For a fuller version of this history, with particular reference to popular culture, see Storey 1998, 1999, 2001, and 2003.
2. See Storey 2001.
3. John Frow and Meaghan Morris offer this very useful definition of 'text' in cultural studies:

   > There is a precise sense in which cultural studies uses the concept of text as its fundamental model . . . Rather than designating a place where meanings are constructed in a single level of inscription (writing, speech, film, dress . . .), it works as an interleaving of 'levels'. If a shopping mall [for example] is conceived on the model of textuality, then this 'text' involves practices, institutional structures and the complex forms of agency they entail, legal, political, and financial conditions of existence, and particular flows of power and knowledge, as well as a particular multilayered semantic organisation; it is an ontologically mixed entity, and one for which there can be no privileged or 'correct' reading. It is this, more than anything else, that forces cultural studies' attention to the diversity of audiences for or users of the structures of textuality it analyses – that is, to the open-ended social life of texts – and that forces it, thereby, to question the authority or finality of its own readings. (1996: 355–6)

   Frow and Morris make clear, texts exist only within networks of intertextual relations. To study a 'text' means to locate it across a range of competing moments of inscription, representation and struggle. In other words, cultural studies seeks to keep in equilibrium the different moments of cultural production – material production, symbolic production, textual production, and the 'production in use' of cultural consumption.
4. A major source of Hall's development of hegemony and articulation is Laclau and Mouffe (1985).

2
TELEVISION

Television is *the* popular cultural form of the twenty-first century. It is without doubt the world's most popular leisure activity. On the day you are reading this book, there will be around the world in excess of 3.5 billion hours spent watching television (Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi 1990: 1). British audiences, for example, spend on average more than one-third of their waking hours watching television. In the USA, average time spent viewing is about twice as much (Allen 1992: 13). The 'average' American will spend in excess of seven years watching television (Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi 1990: xi).

ENCODING AND DECODING TELEVISUAL DISCOURSE

If we are in search of a founding moment when cultural studies first emerges from left-Leavisism, 'pessimistic' versions of Marxism, American mass communication models, culturalism and structuralism, the publication of Stuart Hall's 'Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse' (Hall 1980; first published in 1973) is perhaps it.[1]

In Hall's model of televisual communication (see Figure 1), the circulation of 'meaning' in televisual discourse passes through three distinctive moments: 'each has its specific modality and conditions of

existence' (128). First, media professionals put into meaningful televisual discourse their particular account of a 'raw' social event. At this moment in the circuit, a range of ways of looking at the world ('ideologies') are 'in dominance'.

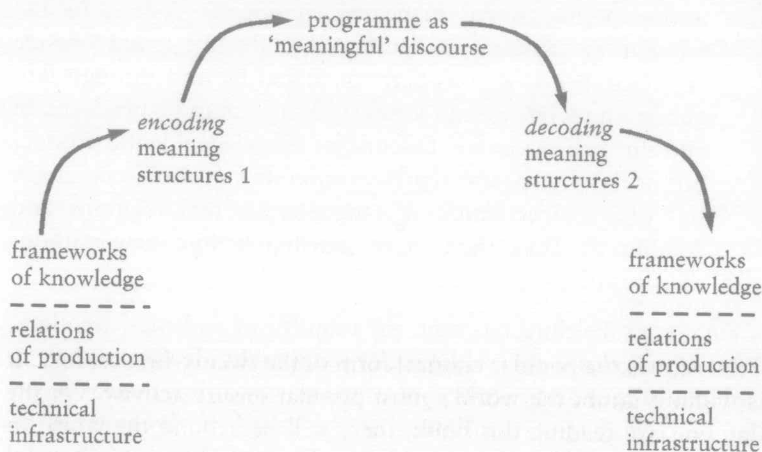

Figure I

> [The moment of media production] is framed throughout by meanings and ideas; knowledge-in-use concerning the routines of production, historically defined technical skills, professional ideologies, institutional knowledge, definitions and assumptions, assumptions about the audience and so on frame the constitution of the programme through this production structure. Further, though the production structures of television originate the television discourse, they do not constitute a closed system. They draw topics, treatments, agendas, events, personnel, images of the audience, 'definitions of the situation' from other sources and other discursive formations within the wider socio-cultural and political structure of which they are a differentiated part. (129)

Thus the media professionals involved determine how the 'raw' social event will be encoded in discourse. However, in the second moment, once the 'raw' social event is in meaningful discourse, that

is, once it has taken the form of televisual discourse, the formal rules of language and discourse are 'in dominance'; the message is now open, for example, to the play of polysemy.

> Since the visual discourse translates a three-dimensional world into two-dimensional planes, it cannot, of course, *be* the referent or concept it signifies . . . Reality exists outside language, but it is constantly mediated by and through language: and what we can know and say has to be produced in and through discourse. Discursive 'knowledge' is the product not of the transparent representation of the 'real' in language but of the articulation of language on real relations and conditions. Thus there is no intelligible discourse without the operation of a code. (131)

Finally, in the third moment, the moment of audience decoding, another range of ways of looking at the world ('ideologies') are 'in dominance'. An audience is confronted not by a 'raw' social event, but by a discursive translation of the event. If the event is to become 'meaningful' to the audience, it must decode and make sense of the discourse. 'If no "meaning" is taken, there can be no "consumption". If the meaning is not articulated in practice, it has no effect' (128). If an audience acts upon its decoding, this then becomes itself a social practice, a 'raw' social event, available to be encoded in another discourse. Thus, through the circulation of discourse, 'production' becomes 'consumption' to become 'production' again. The circuit starts in the 'social' and ends, to begin again, in the 'social'.

In other words, meanings and messages are not simply 'transmitted', they are always produced: first by the encoder from the 'raw' material of everyday life; second, by the audience in relation to its location in other discourses. Each moment is 'determinate', operating in its own conditions of production. Moreover, as Hall makes clear, the moments of encoding and decoding may not be perfectly symmetrical. There is nothing inevitable about the outcome of the process – what is intended and what is taken may not coincide. Media professionals may wish decoding to correspond with encoding, but they cannot prescribe or guarantee this. Governed by

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