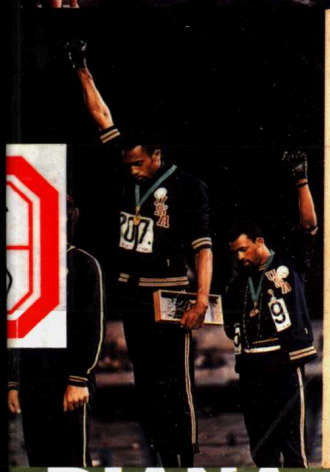
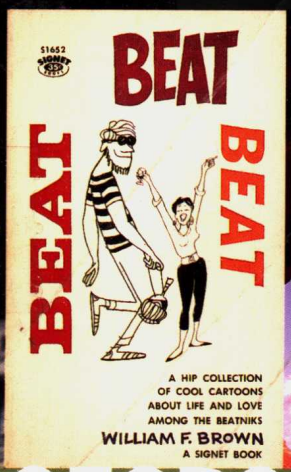
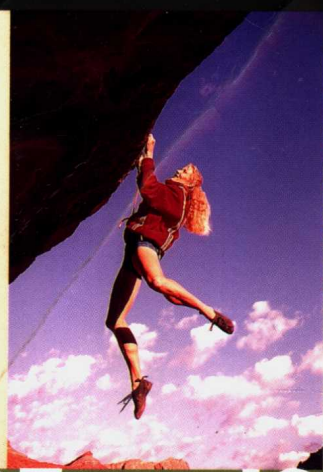
READING CULTURE

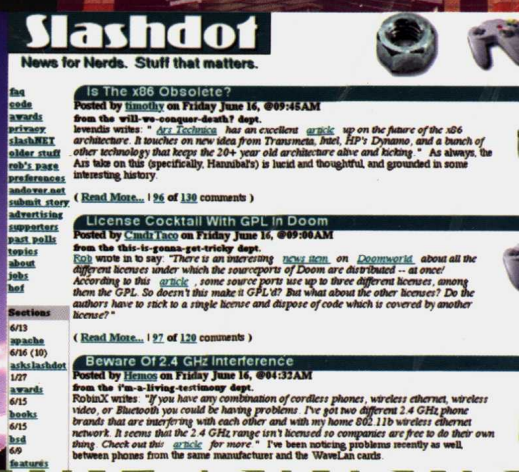
CONTEXTS FOR CRITICAL READING AND WRITING

Fourth Edition









DIANA GEORGE JOHN TRIMBUR

Reading Culture

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Fourth Edition

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Preface

Every edition of *Reading Culture* has opened with these words from Raymond Williams: "Culture is ordinary; that is where we must start." We start, then, with the world that surrounds us and the experience of everyday life. In *Reading Culture*, we ask students to look at culture as a way of life that organizes social experience and shapes the identities of individuals and groups. We will be using the term *culture* in this textbook to talk about how people make sense of their worlds and about the values, beliefs, and practices in which they invest their energies and allegiances. One of our central aims is to provide students with reading and writing assignments in their familiar ways of life, and to understand how these ways of life fit into the diverse, mass-mediated, multicultural realities of contemporary America.

Reading Culture assumes that students are already immersed in a wealth of cultural data and that their experiences of everyday life can usefully be brought to attention as material for reflection and deliberation. The reading and writing assignments in *Reading Culture* are designed to promote a critical distancing so that students can begin to observe and evaluate as well as participate in contemporary America. To this end, *Reading Culture* asks students to read in two ways. First we ask students to read carefully and critically the range of writing about culture we have assembled here. We ask student to identify the purposes and assumptions writers bring to the study of culture and the rhetorical patterns they use to enact their aims. Second, we ask students to read the social world around them, to identify the patterns of meaning in the commonplace, and to put into words their familiar experiences of everyday life that often go without saying.

Reading Culture is organized into ten chapters. The first chapter, "Reading and Writing About Culture: The Case of Daytime Talk TV," provides both a general introduction to the study of culture and a case study of daytime talk TV. The reading selections illustrate how writing about culture seeks to influence public opinion. The case study includes a step-by-step sequence of reading and writing activities that introduce students to a number of useful reading strategies—underlining, annotating, and summarizing—and writing strategies—exploratory writing, synthesis, and deliberative judgment. In addition, the case study includes critical strategies for watching daytime talk TV and guidelines for interviewing other viewers.

The chapters that form the main part of *Reading Culture*, as in past editions, are arranged under a number of broad topics. "Generations" and "Schooling" explore the personal experience of growing up and learning in contemporary America. "Images," "Style," and "Public Space" explore the ways values and ideals are conveyed in the popular media, as well as in clothing and hairstyles and in the way public space is organized. In the remaining chapters, "Storytelling," "Work," "History,"

and "Multicultural America," students can investigate how the narratives Americans tell themselves and those that are told about them come to be part of national mythmaking.

In the third edition of *Reading Culture*, we included two new features—*Visual Culture* and *Fieldwork*—that are now standard parts of the textbook. In each chapter, a *Visual Culture* section presents strategies for analyzing and interpreting films, photographs, television shows, ads, public health messages, page design, signs in public places, and other forms of visual communication. In addition, most chapters include a *Fieldwork* section that provides ways of studying culture through interviews, participant observation, questionnaires, audience studies, oral histories, and other forms of on-site research.

Reading Culture is designed to be used flexibly and creatively. Instructors may wish to ask students to work on the chapters in *Reading Culture* as they are arranged, but this is only one possible order. In the Alternate Contents, we have classified the reading selections in terms of genres and rhetorical modes, and the Instructor's Manual suggests ways to pair readings across chapters.

NEW TO THE FOURTH EDITION

This fourth edition includes new and expanded features to help students investigate contemporary and past cultures. These additions come in large part from discussions we've had with writing teachers who have used previous editions of *Reading Culture*.

- *Checking Out the Web* and the *Reading Culture Online* Website. With the expansion of the Internet and the dizzying proliferation of the Web, the way people communicate has changed dramatically in recent years. To take into account how the Web has become such a cultural force, we have expanded the feature *Checking Out the Web* to include a new section *Reading the Web*, with guidelines for analyzing websites and talk on the Web. In addition, *Reading Culture* now has its own website with links to the sites we discuss in the book and further activities and resources. See www.awl.com/george.
- *Mining the Archive*. To add historical depth to the topics presented in *Reading Culture* and to offer students further research opportunities, each chapter now includes the feature *Mining the Archive*. This feature sends students to various sources as repositories of historical materials, including old newspapers, textbooks, magazines, comic books and comic strips, court cases, and government reports—whether in libraries, special collections, or on websites. In addition, we ask students to see what they can find in local museums and historical societies, and to design a walking tour of a historical site.
- *Perspectives*. Many chapters now include paired readings so that students can see how writers go about developing different perspectives on a topic. In some cases the writers may outrightly disagree, but in others they may simply take up different points of views. These paired readings ask students to consider the various ways writers approach cultural analysis and the kinds of assumptions they bring to their interpretations.

The readings in *Reading Culture* draw on a variety of resources, including popular press features, academic scholarships, and news reports. Each reading selection is introduced by a headnote that provides a context for the reading and a Suggestion for Reading that directs students to notice particular themes or rhetorical features in the selection. The reading selections are followed by Suggestions for Discussion, which raise issues for students to talk about in class or in small collaborative groups. The Suggestions for Writing ask students to consider a range of angles on the issues presented in the reading selections. Typically these writing assignments ask students to interpret a key point or passage in the reading selection, to relate

the reading selection to their own experience, and to connect the reading to other readings and to the cultural realities of contemporary America.

The fourth edition of *Reading Culture* offers opportunities extending across chapters to work with visual literacy, multiculturalism, and microethnography. The work you do with this text will, however, depend on your needs and your students' interests. We think that with this edition *Reading Culture* has become a more flexible resource for teaching writing and critical reading, and for asking students to write about, and in the culture of, contemporary America.

An Instructor's Manual is also available to adopters of this edition.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are a number of people we want to thank for their insight and advice. Robert Schwegler deserves credit for helping us conceptualize this project in its first edition. Joseph Trimmer explained how to make a textbook and offered useful suggestions as a reviewer and as a friend. Lynn Huddon and Leslie Taggart provided the editorial support for this edition. We appreciate as well the careful readings we received by reviewers of this book:

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We want to thank particularly the teachers who have used the first three editions of *Reading Culture*. The feedback, suggestions, and insights they have offered us over the years have enabled us to see the book in new ways and to plan the fourth edition with their ideas in mind. Thanks to Marguerite Helmers and the group of writing faculty from University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh, who shared their experience using the second edition. Stephen Ruffus and the writing faculty at Salt Lake Community College helped us see thematic strands in the book. We want to thank Bill Baller of Worcester Polytechnic Institute for help with readings on the Vietnam War and Clare Trimbur for showing us how to do close readings of English Only legislation. Diane Shoos, Stephen Jukuri, and Nancy Barron at Michigan Tech offered thoughtful advice as we wrote the third edition. Tim Fountain, now at St. Cloud State, taught an early draft of the daytime talk TV chapter, allowing us to learn from his students' experience. We want to give particular thanks to Libby Miles of the University of Rhode Island and to Lucia Trimbur of Yale University for their work on the *Reading Culture* website. We also

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Diana George
John Trimbur

Contents

Introduction

READING CULTURE

culture: education, enrichment, erudition, learning, wisdom, breeding, gentility, civilization, colony, community, crowd, folks, group, settlement, society, staff, tribe, background, development, environment, experience, past, schooling, training, upbringing, customs, habits, mores, traditions

The British cultural historian Raymond Williams has written that culture "is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language." This is so, Williams explains, because the term *culture* has acquired new meanings over time without losing the older meanings along the way. Therefore, writers sometimes use the term *culture* in quite different and incompatible ways. Even a simple list of synonyms, such as the one that opens this chapter, can illustrate the truth of Williams's observation.

For some, culture refers to great art in the European tradition—Beethoven's symphonies, Shakespeare's plays, Picasso's paintings, or Jane Austen's novels. In this manner, culture refers to something that you read; something that you see in a museum, an art gallery, or a theater; or something that you hear in a concert hall. This culture is often referred to as "high culture" and is closely linked to the idea of *becoming* cultured—of cultivating good taste and discriminating judgment. A cultured person, according to this sense of the term, is someone who has achieved a certain level of refinement and class.

We encounter this use of the term more frequently than some might imagine. For example, advertisers who want to invest their products with class will draw on this idea of culture, as in the Absolut Vodka campaign that pays homage to such artists as Vermeer, Rubens, and Modigliani.

Those who equate culture with high art would most likely think, for example, that pop stars like Britney Spears or rappers like Snoop Doggie Dogg do not belong in the domain of culture. They would not include popular entertainment like *NYPD Blue, All My Children, Monday Night Football,* the *National Enquirer,* the latest Harlequin romance, or music videos in that category either. In making a distinction between high and low art, this view of culture is largely interested in the classics and in keeping serious art separate from popular culture.

Others, however, take an alternative approach to the study of culture. Instead of separating high from low art, they think of culture in more inclusive terms. For them, culture refers not only to the literary and artistic works which critics have called masterpieces but also to the way of life that characterizes a particular group of

ABSOLUT HOFMEKLER.

HOMAGE TO JAN VERMEER

Ori Hofmeker is an artist on the staff of *Penthouse* magazine. For this ad campaign, he was asked to reproduce works of old masters, inserting an Absolut bottle in the ad as though it belonged in the original. Richard Lewis, *The Absolut Story*.

people at a particular time. Developed since the turn of the century by anthropologists, though it has now spread into common use, *culture* offers a way to think about how individuals and groups organize and make sense of their social experience—at home, in school, at work, and at play. Culture includes all the social institutions, patterns of behavior, systems of belief, and kinds of popular entertainment that create the social world in which people live. Taken this way, culture means not simply masterpieces of art, music, and literature, but a people's lived experience—what goes on in the everyday lives of individuals and groups.

Reading Culture explores the interpretation of contemporary American culture and how cultural ideas and ideals are communicated in the home, the workplace, the school, and through the media. When we use the term *culture,* we are using a definition that, as you might have guessed, is much closer to the second definition than to the first. We think that the distinction between high and low art is indeed an important one but not because high art is necessarily better or more "cultured" than popular entertainment. What interests us is how the two terms are used in an ongoing debate about the meaning of contemporary culture in the United States—about, say, what children should read in school, about the influences of popular media, or about the quality of Americans' popular tastes. We will ask you to explore

these issues in the following chapters to see how arguments over media or schooling or our national identity tell stories of contemporary U.S. culture.

In short, the purpose of this book is not to bring you culture or to make you cultured but to invite you to become more aware of the culture in which you already live. According to the way we will be using the term, culture is not something you can go out and get. Rather, culture means all the familiar pursuits and pleasures that shape people's identities and that enable and constrain what they do and what they might become. Our idea is to treat contemporary American culture as a vast research project—to understand its ways of life from the inside as you live and observe them.

READING CULTURE

The following chapters offer opportunities to read, research, and write about contemporary culture. The reading selections group together writers who have explored central facets of American culture or who offer information and ideas for you to draw on as you do your own work of reading and writing about culture. Each chapter raises a series of questions about how American culture organizes social experience and how Americans understand the meaning and purpose of their daily lives.

In these chapters, we will be asking you to think about how the writers find patterns in U.S. culture and how they position themselves in relation to contemporary cultural realities. We will be asking you to read not only to understand what the writers are saying but also to identify what assumptions they are making about cultural issues such as schooling, the media, or national identity. We also will be asking you to do another kind of reading, where the text is not the printed word but the experience of everyday life in contemporary America. We will be asking you to read culture—to read the social world around you, at home and in classrooms, at work and at play, in visual images and public places.

Reading a culture means finding patterns in the familiar. In many respects, of course, you are already a skilled reader of culture. Think of all the reading that you do in the course of a day. You read not only the textbooks assigned in your courses or the books and magazines you turn to for pleasure. You probably read a variety of other "texts" without thinking about what you are actually reading. You read the clothes that people wear, the cars that they drive, and the houses that they live in to make guesses about their social status or about how you will relate to them. You read the way social experience is organized on your campus to determine who your friends will be, who the preppies are, the jocks, the hippies. You read all kinds of visual images in the media not only for the products advertised or the entertainment offered but for the lifestyles that are made attractive and desirable. Most of your reading takes place as you move through the daily reality of contemporary American life, and it often takes place below the threshold of consciousness. Often, people just take this kind of reading for granted.

To read culture means *not* taking for granted such readings of everyday life. Reading culture means bringing forward for analysis and reflection those commonplace aspects of everyday life that people normally think of as simply being there, a part of the natural order of things. Most likely you do some of that kind of reading occasionally when you stop to think through an ad or a history lesson or anything that makes you connect what you are seeing or reading with other ideas coming your way every day. Very likely, you do not accept without question all that you see and read. You probably turn a skeptical eye to much of it. Still, to read culture you will have to be more consistent as you learn to bring the familiar back into view so that you can begin to understand how people organize and make sense of their lives. To read culture in this way is to see that American culture is not

simply passed down from generation to generation in a fixed form but rather is a way of life in which individuals and groups are constantly making their own meanings in the world of contemporary America.

We are all influenced by what cultural critics call mainstream culture, whether we feel part of it or not. Everyone to one extent or another (and whether they embrace or reject its tenets) is shaped by what is sometimes called the "American way of life" and the value that it claims to place on hard work, fair play, individual success, romantic love, family ties, and patriotism. After all, to grow up in the United States means, in part, learning what the mainstream values. This is, undoubtedly, the most mass-mediated culture in human history, and it is virtually impossible to evade the dominant images of America past and present—whether of the Pilgrims gathered at that mythic scene of the first Thanksgiving or of retired pro football players in a Miller Lite commercial.

Yet for all the power of the "American way of life" as it is presented by schools, the mass media, and the culture industry, U.S. culture is hardly monolithic or homogeneous. The culture in which Americans live is a diverse one, divided along the lines of race, class, gender, language, ethnicity, age, occupation, region, politics, and religion. America is a multicultural society, and, in part because of that diversity, the culture of contemporary America is constantly changing, constantly in flux. To read culture, therefore, is to see not only how its dominant cultural expressions shape people but also how individuals and groups shape culture—how their responses to and interpretations of contemporary America rewrite its meanings according to their own purposes, interests, and aspirations.

ASSIGNMENT

Work together with a group of classmates. Think of as many instances as you can where the term *culture* or *cultured* appears. For example, when do you hear other people that you know (family, friends, coworkers, neighbors, teachers, and so on) use the terms? When do you use them yourself? Where have you seen the terms in written texts or heard them used on radio and television or in the movies? Make a list of occasions when you have encountered or used the terms. Categorize the various uses of the terms. Are they used in the same way in each instance or do their meanings differ? Explain your answer. How do you account for the similarities and differences in the use of the terms? Compare the results of your group discussion to the results of other groups.