AN INTRODUCTION TO STUDYING POPULAR CULTURE

DOMINIC STRINATI

An introduction to studying popular culture

■ Dominic Strinati

First published 2000
by Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane
London EC4P 4EE

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
29 West 35th Street, New York,
NY 10001

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group

Typeset in Sabon by Taylor & Francis Books Ltd

Printed and bound in Great Britain by St Edmundsbury Press, Bury St Edmonds, Suffolk

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Strinati, Dominic
An introduction to studying popular culture/ Dominic Strinati.
p.cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. Mass media–United States. 2. Mass media–Great Britain. 3.Popular culture– United States. 4.Popular culture–Great Britain. I. Title.
P92.U5 S827 2000
302.23'0973–dc21
00-024482

ISBN 0–415–15766–8 (hbk)
ISBN 0–415–15767–6 (pbk)

Acknowledgements

The completion of this book was helped considerably by the period of study leave the University of Leicester granted me, and I wish to acknowledge here the opportunity this provided. This book has developed out of a course I have taught, for a number of years, in the Sociology department at the University of Leicester. Many students have taken this course, and I wish to acknowledge the contribution they have made to the development of both the course and this book. I also wish to thank my colleagues in the Leicester University Sociology department for the help and support they have given me in the writing of this book. There are a number of other people who have made an important contribution to this book. I would like to thank the staff of Routledge, in particular Ruth Graham and Alistair Daniel, for their invaluable work in producing the book. I would also like to thank Brigid Bell for the very helpful and efficient work she has done as copy-editor. Lastly, I would like to offer a special word of thanks to Rebecca Barden for her patience, advice and encouragement. Fortunately for me, she was willing to commission the book, and to allow me to finish it in my own time, while still making sure it was eventually completed. Of course, I am ultimately responsible for what follows.

Introduction

This is a book about popular culture. Its main aim is to consider the study of popular culture, and to achieve this a number of examples will be assessed. It is designed to provide an introduction to studying popular culture. It does not set out to celebrate or denigrate popular culture, nor to evaluate it directly. It is equally not intended to provide a detailed summary of the theories which have been used to explain popular culture (Strinati 1995). Rather, the tentative aim is to begin to show some of the ways popular culture has been, and can be, studied empirically and historically. Needless to say, theoretical concerns are not, and should not be, divorced from this study; their relevance will be apparent at various points throughout this book.

To pursue these aims, this book will look at the examples of popular cinema and television and show how some of their features have been studied. Before we outline these features, a number of qualifications need to be made clear. First, the assumptions of this book are mainly sociological and historical, and it is hoped they will be backed up by the arguments developed below. Second, it is intended to provide a selective overview, rather than an exhaustive survey, of the topics it covers. Since it is an introduction,

this will help to bring out the points which need to be stressed, rather than allowing them to be submerged in too much detail. In the end, of course, there is no substitute for such detail. In being selective rather than exhaustive, it thus tries to provide suggestions which can be pursued, instead of delving more deeply into the areas studied. Third, there are some general points which the book makes, and these are set out in the conclusion. However, while the individual chapters contribute to this conclusion, they are also meant to stand on their own as introductory accounts of the specific examples they discuss. This inevitably results in some repetition of points and arguments, but since, to a degree, each chapter can be read separately from the others, this should not be too much of a problem. Finally, the book provides a basic account of the various features considered in it and thus gives a picture as well as an analysis of popular culture. The intention is to describe as well as explain popular culture.

The general aim of this book, then, is to provide an introduction to the study of popular culture. Obviously this is a potentially enormous task, so some selection is inevitable. Therefore, certain examples have been chosen to make the book more manageable and to give the exposition greater clarity and relevance. The examples selected – popular cinema and television – proved to be popular and powerful commercial mass media during the twentieth century and have played a leading and determinant role in the production and consumption of popular culture. Although specific features may well change, their importance looks set to continue well into the twenty-first century. The twentieth century witnessed a transfer of influence from cinema to television; in the earlier parts of the century, popular cinema established itself as a key visual mass medium and its relative decline resulted from the rise to prominence of popular television during the second half of the century. An introduction to certain aspects of these media should therefore give us some understanding of the growth and significance of popular culture, and of what its study entails. In this book we will examine a number of themes and issues that have emerged as popular cinema and television have been studied. We will

attempt to assess how popular culture has been studied and consider what this tells us about how it may continue to be studied. The examples selected are therefore analysed with these aims in mind.

The first two chapters look at Hollywood cinema, its formation, its typical practices and its power. Chapter 1 considers its economic and industrial character, the development of, and changes in, its control over the production, distribution and exhibition of films. Chapter 2 adds to this picture by outlining the importance of narrative, ideology and genres for the Hollywood film, and also its role in popular culture. With this general picture of Hollywood popular cinema established, the next three chapters follow it up by analysing three film genres: the gangster film, the horror film and *film noir*. The particular reasons for selecting these genres are put forward in the respective chapters. However, the overall aims of studying popular culture and stressing the power and importance of Hollywood cinema provide equally compelling reasons for the study of such genres. Another major objective in these chapters is to assess the idea of genre as a way of studying popular culture.

In the next four chapters of the book, attention is turned from popular cinema to popular television, though links and comparisons between the two are not forgotten. Chapter 6 examines some of the factors which have influenced the development of popular television. It looks at the ideas and practices of citizenship and consumerism, outlines their varying influence and stresses the contradictions which have emerged between them. It also focuses upon how consumerism is becoming increasingly predominant in the production and consumption of popular television (Murdock 1990, 1994). Although the audience is crucial for understanding popular culture, the chapters on cinema do not consider it that directly or consistently, partly because of a relative lack of evidence (Allen 1990; Izod 1988). In contrast, the television audience has been a long-standing issue, as Chapter 7 shows by focusing upon the research traditions and theories it has attracted and the findings unearthed by some recent research. Chapter 8 follows up the

study of film genres with a general consideration of popular television genres. It also selects a specific example, the soap opera, and analyses its production, programme structure and audience, though other examples are referred to where relevant. The final substantive chapter takes account of recent theoretical developments by illustrating and criticising postmodern theory. This discussion refers mainly to popular television, but examples from cinema are also covered. The critique of postmodern theory it advances can also be seen as preparing the ground for the arguments this book has to make about studying popular culture.

In this introduction we have tried to set the stage for the chapters which follow. As noted, the aim is to assess how popular culture has been studied. Apart from the main, substantive chapters, the book also raises some general themes and ideas. The nature of these, however, can be left to the conclusion, when, hopefully, their justification and logic will be evident.

Contents

Chapter 1

Popular cinema

The Hollywood system

THESE OPENING CHAPTERS examine the economic, cultural and social significance of Hollywood cinema as a type of popular culture. They try to assess some of the characteristic features which have been associated with its development, and the power it exercises. The intention, in presenting an introductory study of Hollywood cinema, is to show how a highly significant popular cultural institution has, and can be, assessed. Hollywood cinema was one of the earliest and most significant developments in the production and consumption of popular culture in the twentieth century. It has since had a general and continuing influence on the popular culture which has come to dominate the modern, industrialised world. It has influenced the ways popular culture is financed, produced, marketed, promoted and consumed. It has played a powerful role in the development of the standard genres into which popular culture has been divided. It has left an almost indelible mark on our understanding of what counts as audience pleasure. It has been centrally involved in the ideologies which have shaped, and been shaped by, these processes. It therefore seems useful to discuss some of the key aspects of contemporary popular culture by looking at Hollywood cinema.

The rise of the Hollywood studio system

We shall start by outlining the rise and fall of the Hollywood studio system. This should convey how Hollywood cinema has been formed by its organisation of the production, distribution and exhibition of films, and how the system it established has developed and changed over time.[1] This outline should provide a basis for the subsequent discussion of narrative, ideology and genre, as well as identifying some of the key features associated with the study of popular cinema.

The film industry is made up of at least three separate activities:

the making or production of films; their distribution to points of exhibition (theatres and cinemas); and their being shown, or exhibited, to a paying audience. Both distribution and exhibition are linked by the promotion of films to the public, and production is clearly associated with technological changes. However, these three processes describe the basics of the industry. The important thing to note about the early film industry is that, for the most part, the production, distribution and exhibition of films were conducted as separate business ventures. The rise of the studio system refers to the economic integration of these three processes. As such, 'oligopoly control through ownership of production, distribution and exhibition represented the full-grown Hollywood studio system' (Gomery 1986: 3). The studio system took thirty years to form, during which time the 'fairly competitive' film industry was turned into 'a tightly held trust'. It reached the peak of its supremacy between the late 1920s and the early 1950s, when Hollywood came to dominate the 'world mass entertainment business' (ibid.: xi, 3, 189). Crucially, as is usually the case, 'it was the profit motive that dictated the nature of film production, distribution and exhibition in the United States during the studio era' (ibid.: xi, 1–2).

The studio system is a narrow definition since the system involved more than merely the use of studios for producing films. It refers to large corporations (eight in all, five 'major', three 'minor') producing profits for each other by acting jointly in controlling not just production but distribution and exhibition as well. 'The fundamental source' of the 'power' of these corporations, in particular the five 'majors', was not provided by 'Hollywood production'. 'Rather, their worldwide distribution networks afforded them enormous cost advantages and their theater chains provided them direct access to the box office' (Gomery 1986: 2). To some extent, the term Hollywood itself was always something of a misnomer. This is partly because the power of the corporations lay not in their production base in Los Angeles and southern California, but in 'the total and necessary corporate cooperation which existed on the levels of distribution and exhibition'. But it was also because real control was exercised from New

York. Indeed, the mystique and fantasy associated with 'the concept' of 'Hollywood' is 'perhaps ... the greatest corporate creation of the studio system' (ibid.: 193–4).

The system was challenged in the late 1940s by declining audiences, the rise of television and anti-trust action aimed at breaking the industry's oligopoly by divesting the majors of their control over exhibition. This period marked the decline of the studio system as it had operated during its heyday. The majors soon adapted to changing conditions with the emergence of the 'package-unit' system. For example, only RKO, among the majors, went out of business; the rest continued, sometimes under different owners (Gomery 1986: xi). Most importantly, even if they lost overt control of exhibition, they retained their power base in distribution.

The emergence of cinema

While it will be necessary to fill in some of the detail as we go along, this is the basic outline of the Hollywood studio system and we need to keep it in mind during the following discussion. The development of the factors referred to here, as well as others, need to be considered when outlining the origins and development of the American film industry.

It has been argued that recognising certain physical and optical properties can help us understand the origins of cinema. There is little doubt, for example, that two 'optical principles' of human perception make cinema as we know it possible. These are 'persistence of vision' and 'the phi phenomenon'. The former refers to how 'the brain retains images cast upon the retina of the eye for approximately one-twentieth to one-fifth of a second beyond their actual removal from the field of vision'. This allows viewers to see the images projected by a reel of film, without noticing the black spaces between the images. The second refers to how we can see the 'blades of a rotating fan as a unitary circular form or the different hues of a spinning color wheel as a single homogeneous color'. This 'creates apparent movement from frame to frame at optimal projection speeds of 12 to 24 fps' for viewers of films (Cook 1990: 1).

These features enable us to watch films and have been necessary for the development of cinema. They are physical pre-requisites for watching films. But while they are basic in this sense, it has not really been claimed that they can account for the emergence of cinema. It is also not clear that this claim could be supported if it were to be put forward. However, Carroll, for example, has tried to relate the 'power of movies' to biological and psychological capacities. He does not directly address the origins of cinema, but his case is relevant to this issue. He argues that the power of films, how they have become 'a worldwide phenomenon', arises from 'pictorial recognition'. This relies upon 'a biological capability that is nurtured in humans as they learn to identify the objects and events in their environment'. As such, it 'is a function of the way stroboscopic or beta phenomena affect the brain's organization of congruous input presented in specifiable sequences to different points on the retina' (1996a: 81). While not wishing to reduce the power of films completely to biological and psychological phenomena (ibid.: 92), he does use this argument to criticise the idea that 'pictures ... are matters of codes and conventions' (ibid.: 81). Instead, 'the power of movies' is determined by the capacity of human perception as described above.

The critical problem here is that we are talking about a fairly permanent biological capacity for pictorial recognition, irrespective of whether it is related to the power of films, or the origins of cinema. Presumably it is not something that can spring into existence quickly. How then can it explain the emergence of cinema in the late nineteenth century, its subsequent world-wide prevalence and the power it has been able to exercise since its invention? This capacity is a pre-requisite, a necessary condition for cinema, but it can hardly qualify as an explanation of the power or origins of cinema and the patterns that marked its subsequent development. The commercial and technological activities of the industrial, capitalist societies within which cinema emerged, as Burch for example suggests, would seem to provide a better basis for explaining the emergence of cinema. To some extent, the very idea of cinema reflects this in that its first appearance is defined by the presentation of a film to a paying audience. The biological capacity to

watch films provides no reason to suppose that the cinema would ever have been invented. An understanding of its origins must therefore be related to the societies in which it emerged, though, even in this case, it cannot be assumed that its invention was inevitable.

A useful and contrasting case is put forward by Burch. He argues that the emergence of cinema involved 'the establishment of a mode of representation' which was 'historically and culturally determined', and which has continued to exert its power over cinema ever since (1978: 92, cf. 91). This is a large task and Burch makes some initial and tentative suggestions about the forces which helped condition the emergence of cinema, and some of the features which this cinema took.

He identifies 'three forces or historical and cultural trends which moulded the cinema during its first two decades' (Burch 1978: 93). The first was 'the folk art kept alive by the urban working classes in Europe and the United States at the turn of the century'. This consisted of 'modes of representation and narrative' from such areas as 'melodrama, vaudeville, pantomime (in England), music hall', 'fairground acts', and various kinds of street entertainment. These were linked as 'cause and effect' to cinema, because 'in its early days' it 'addressed itself exclusively to the urban "lower classes" ' and 'its practitioners were for the most part "of humble origin" '(ibid.).

However, cinema was emerging within a capitalist society, which meant that the 'second force' to which it was subject was 'the underlying pressures exercised by the specifically bourgeois modes of representation'. These were drawn 'from literature, painting and especially the theatre' (Burch 1978: 93). Burch sees this mode as being defined by such features as 'linearity, haptic screen space and the individualisation of characters'. These were only intermittently present in early cinema, dominated as it was by 'elements' of 'popular origin'. However, this situation was 'gradually reversed between 1908 and 1915' due to 'the economic development of the cinema and the resulting need to attract an audience with more money and leisure at its disposal' (ibid.: 94). Thus, the features of the bourgeois mode became the defining