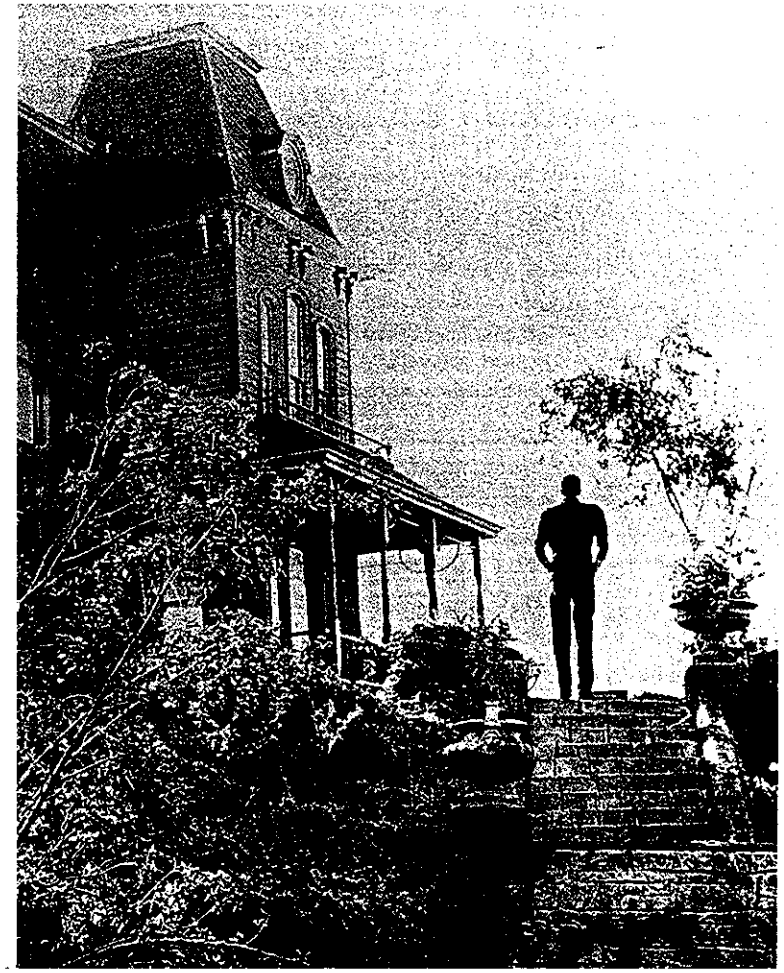
Popular culture or film art? Norman Bates ponders the contradictions of *Psycho* (1960)

8 *Andy Willis*

Cultural studies and popular film



Cultural studies emerged in Britain during the 1970s – the same period as screen theory – and was closely associated at this time with work generated at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in Birmingham. In fact, both 'screen theory' and cultural studies developed, at least initially, through a process of dialogue and debate with one another. The conclusion to David Morley's classic cultural studies text, *The 'Nationwide' Audience*,[1] for example, clearly situates its position in relation to certain tendencies in screen theory. However, screen theory and cultural studies were not mutually exclusive. Many of the figures associated with cultural studies were published in *Screen*, and there was a constant interchange of ideas between the two approaches. As a result, the main feature which came to distinguish cultural studies from screen theory in the 1970s was that while the latter tended to see popular film as a form of ideological domination, cultural studies tended to see the 'popular' as a site of struggle between groups, rather than the property or expression of any specific group's interests. For this reason, cultural studies did not rely upon a simple opposition between a conservative popular culture and a radical avant-garde, but tended to be far more historical in its focus. It was concerned with the ways in which cultural forms developed through a process of conflict and struggle between social groups.

Work within cultural studies was also critical of the way in which screen theory tended to neglect the social conditions within which the consumption of cultural texts took place. Screen theory was preoccupied with textual analysis, and tended to deduce the ideological effect of texts from an analysis of their formal features. However, this form of analysis, as has frequently been pointed out, tends to ignore the activities of audiences. It implies a 'hypodermic' model of media effects in which audiences are seen as little more than a 'passive mass' who are acted upon by the text and have little or no means of resistance. For example, *The Cinema Book*,[2] a text which claims to provide a comprehensive summary of the major areas in film studies, gives very little space to the discussion of audiences. Even in the section entitled 'Narrative and the Audience', the analysis of audiences remains abstract. It is concerned with the ways in which texts construct the position of the spectator, not with the ways in which actual audiences make sense of texts. Although it is briefly acknowledged that social factors may affect interpretation, and that, as a result, the position of the spectator constructed by the text might not coincide with the position of 'empirical

spectators' (actual social subjects), the implications of this observation are not drawn out. If social factors do affect interpretation, and if this does mean that the position of the spectator as constructed by the text does not necessarily coincide with that of 'empirical spectators', then one cannot simply deduce the ideological effect of a text from an analysis of its formal features.

As a result, some sort of investigation into the social conditions of the audience is essential if one is to understand the meaning and significance of popular film. However, this kind of work has largely been conducted within the field of media and cultural studies, rather than film studies; and usually in relation to television and popular fiction, rather than film.

None the less, the cultural studies approach can be applied to the analysis of popular film, and its strength is that it avoids the tendency either to celebrate or to condemn popular forms. It allows one to study how distinctions between popular film and more legitimate areas of cinema are produced and reproduced, and the ways in which such distinctions act to legitimate the tastes of dominant social groups. Furthermore, as the introduction suggested, many of the critics associated with cultural studies have questioned what is at stake in different definitions of 'the popular'.

The emergence of cultural studies

Cultural studies has emerged and developed over the past twenty-five years, most notably in Britain, Australia, the USA and Canada. It emerged out of a dialogue among different academic disciplines, most notably literature, history and sociology. Each of these disciplines offered different approaches to their area of study, and it was the ways in which cultural studies sought to bring these approaches together and relate them to one another which justified its claim to interdisciplinarity. This interdisciplinarity, coupled with the rapid expansion of work in the area, has made it difficult to define exactly what cultural studies is. Different institutions and practitioners seem to have very different ideas about what the area is or could be. But this difficulty in pinning cultural studies down also remains its greatest asset. It offers the possibility of developing different ways of analysising and understanding which can be applied to diverse areas of study.

None the less, it is widely accepted that the roots of what was to become cultural studies lie in the work of three British writers: Richard

Hoggart, Raymond Williams and E. P. Thompson. During the late 1950s and the 1960s, these critics were responsible for extending the meaning of the word culture. Instead of equating 'culture' with a 'canon' of great works of art as many previous critics had done, these writers used it in a quite different sense. They tended to use culture in its social or anthropological sense to refer to the institutions, activities and beliefs which define a social group's particular way of life. It was for this reason that Williams claimed that culture was 'ordinary'.[3] He acknowledged that the word 'culture' had come to mean 'the outward and emphatically visible sign of a special kind of people, cultivated people',[4] but he argued there was another meaning. For Williams, culture was not the property of social elites, but was also 'a particular way of life, which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning but also in institutions and ordinary behaviour'. This emphasis on ordinary behaviour was central and it opened up the possibility of taking the study of working-class or popular culture seriously.

Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy*[5] made a valuable contribution to this project. Rather than using his literary training simply to analyse and privilege official literary masterpieces, Hoggart turned his attention to working-class cultural forms such as pubs, working men's clubs, sports, popular songs, etc. In so doing, he sought to evoke the complex relations which distinguished this culture in order to portray it as a 'full rich life'. Whereas earlier critics had opposed a cultured minority to an uncultured working-class majority, Hoggart's analysis demonstrated that the working class had a rich and complex cultural tradition of its own. However, unlike Williams, he argued that this traditional working-class culture was being threatened and corrupted by a 'brash' and inauthentic mass culture. The working-class culture which he valued was presented as a traditional organic community, but one which was already located in a past associated with his own nostalgic memories of childhood. The popular music, television, fiction and film which were so important to the working-class culture of the 1950s and 1960s were therefore seen merely to corrupt and debase this earlier form of working class culture, and replace its richness and complexity with superficiality and artificiality.

Williams, on the other hand, became fascinated with these new media and the analysis of these forms was to become 'the central plank of the new field of cultural studies'.[6] Like Hoggart, Williams wanted to extend the analysis of culture beyond the realm of high culture to include the patterns of working-class life. But in his attempt to study 'the characteristic forms through which members of society communicate',[7] he was willing to take the new systems of 'communications' seriously, rather than seeing them simply as a threat to 'authenticity'. Whatever the problems with Williams's analysis of communications, its strength was that it sought to acknowledge their importance in cultural life and to develop modes of analysis which were appropriate to them. Although this included an analysis of media institutions and modes of production, Williams' examination of the cultural industries rejected the assumptions associated with mass culture theory in which high cultural forms were privileged as if they were somehow free of specific institutions and modes of production.

At this stage, however, Williams was still concerned to analyse 'the culture of a whole society', and it was this approach which E. P. Thompson criticized in his review of Williams's *The Long Revolution*. Thompson was both a historian and a Marxist, and as a Marxist he took issue with Williams's definition of culture as 'a whole way of life'. For Thompson, culture was better described as 'a whole way of conflict'.[8] He wanted to present culture as the product of struggles between *different* ways of life. Working-class culture was not simply different from middle-class culture, but was a specific form of opposition to it. For Thompson, working-class culture did not simply arise out of the shared meanings and values of a particular class at a specific moment in history; it was central to the emergence of a class. It was the specific means by which its members assembled themselves as a class 'for itself' and so resisted their exploitation by other classes.[9]

In this way, Thompson was reacting against specific forms of Marxism - specifically Althusserian or structural Marxism – which maintained that classes were simply defined by their relationship to the means of production. In contrast, Thompson argued that culture was essential to the formation of any class. Cultural concerns were not secondary to class politics, but were the specific realm within which resistance was articulated and practised. As a result, he not only claimed that working-class resistance took place through popular culture, he also emphasized that issues of domination, resistance and contestation were central to popular forms.

Because culturalists such as Hoggart celebrated working-class cultural production as an authentic expression of working-class interests, they tended to be critical of mass cultural forms such as cinema which they believed were imposed on the working-class community from the outside. The importance of film as a popular form was either ignored

or seen as a sign of inauthenticity and superficiality. In this way, this work often reproduced some of the oppositions that had structured debates about the popular in mass culture theory. Nevertheless, it has also been pointed out that the cinema was an important institution in the working-class community, and cinema-going an important practice.[10] Furthermore, it is possible to see a 'fit' between some films and working-class cultural values and practices. For example, as Chambers argues, Ealing comedies in the 1940s and 1950s emphasized 'the subaltern world and values of the street community, the pub, the Coronation cup, fading sepia photographs on the parlour mantelpiece, the virtues of working and sticking together'.[11] However, as Chambers notes, this fails to exlain why, on the whole, British working-class audiences have tended to prefer American films. For early critics like Hoggart this could only be interpreted as a sign of the power of mass culture and the ways in which Americanization was 'unbending the springs of action' of the British working class. Alternatively, as Miles and Smith have suggested in their work on 1930s cinema, American films may have 'fitted' more closely with the values of a British working-class audience than British films.

Hegemony, dialogue and taste

By the 1970s, cultural studies was beginning to establish itself as a vital and important area within academic life, and, in this period, much of the work that helped shape it was associated with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham. Under the directorship of Stuart Hall, the work of the Centre was still clearly indebted to Hoggart, Williams and Thompson, but it was also influenced by an alternative theoretical tradition, French structuralism. In fact, Hall has claimed that it was the tensions between culturalism and structuralism which were decisive in the formation of cultural studies.[12] For example, while culturalists such as Hoggart, Williams and Thompson had emphasized the creativity of ordinary people in the production of their own culture, structuralism tended to stress determinism. Rather than seeing culture as the product of human activity, structuralism tended to see human activity as the product of culture.

The importance of structuralism to the Centre was that it offered a theory of ideology which was a necessary antidote to culturalism's overemphasis on the radicalism of working-class popular culture. Although structuralism may have overemphasized ideological domination and provided little real space for struggle, it did offer some explanation of how cultural reproduction was brought about and how ordinary working people came to accept or even support the inequalities of the existing social system. However, cultural studies was far more critical of structuralism than was screen theory. (For an outline of this position, see chapter six.) As Hall pointed out, structuralism had functionalist tendencies which made it almost impossible for those working within this theoretical framework to conceive of 'ideologies which are not, by definition, "dominant"', nor could it broach 'the concept of struggle' in anything but a gestural way.[13] Ultimately Hall argues that just as the weaknesses of culturalism were answered by structuralism, the weaknesses of structuralism were answered by culturalism. As he noted, culturalism 'insisted, correctly, on the affirmative moment of the development of conscious struggle and organization as a necessary element in the analysis of history, ideology and consciousness'.[14]

The Centre found a way of overcoming the tensions between culturalism and structuralism in the work of Antonio Gramsci, an Italian neo-Marxist. However, the way out of the impasse between these two previous positions also depended on the influence of the Russian linguist, V. N. Volosinov, and in a far less explicit way, the French cultural analyst, Pierre Bourdieu.

The importance of Gramsci's work was that it enabled the Centre to address the issue of cultural domination without conceptualizing subordinate groups as merely passive 'effects' of ideology. Gramsci's central concept of 'hegemony' (or leadership) offered an explanation of how certain classes and social groups come to establish and maintain a position of dominance over other classes and groups. Rather than simply imposing its own will upon subordinate groups through the use of ideological or physical coercion, Gramsci argued that a class can only attain dominance by 'winning' the right to rule over others. It must present itself as the group which is best able to fulfil the interests and aspirations of other classes or social groups. As a result, he claimed that a class or group can only achieve and maintain dominance over others if it is able to gain the *consent* of other classes or groups by addressing their interests and aspirations and making concessions to them.[15]

However, Gramsci also stressed that hegemony is inherently unstable. Dominant classes can never finally satisfy the demands of subordinate classes. The dominance of one depends on the subordination of the other. For example, as Marx had argued, the interests of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat are necessarily at odds with one another. The dom-

inance of the former depends upon its exploitation of the latter. A bourgeoisie cannot exist without a proletariat to exploit. As a result, there will always be challenges to dominant classes (so long as there continues to be a dominant class) and such challenges will continually require the dominant class to reform itself in order to pacify and appease them. As Stuart Hall argues:

> Hegemony ... is not universal and 'given' to the continuing rule of a particular class. It has to be won, reproduced, sustained. Hegemony is, as Gramsci said, a 'moving equilibrium' containing relations of forces favourable and unfavourable to this or that tendency.[16]

Therefore, by using Gramsci's concept of hegemony the Centre was able to analyse culture in a way which was, in Raymond Williams' terms, 'historical' rather than 'epochal'.[17] Rather than understanding 'capitalist' or 'patriarchal' culture as essentially fixed and unchanging systems, the 'turn to Gramsci' allowed the Centre to address the historical processes through which these systems changed and developed. For example, the work of the Centre demonstrated that while the political configuration generally referred to as 'Thatcherism' may have been an example of a capitalist culture, it was significantly different from – and even opposed to – the post-war welfare capitalism which preceded it.

Through the concept of hegemony, the Centre was also able not only to acknowledge the interests and aspirations of different classes and social groups within a given society at a specific historical moment, it was also able to illustrate how these interests and aspirations were the product of struggles between them. In this way, it offers a way out of the oppositions which had dominated the discussion of popular forms such as popular film. It enabled one to present an analysis of popular films which neither celebrated nor condemned them, but examined how they were produced in relation to the struggles between dominant and subordinate groups. In this way, as Tony Bennett has argued,

> the critical spirit of Gramsci's work, totally shunning the intolerable condescension of the mass culture critic while simultaneously avoiding any tendency towards a celebratory populism, both avoids and disqualifies the bipolar alternatives of structuralism and culturalism.[18]

As a result, popular film could no longer be seen as an ideological form which was simply imposed upon subordinate groups. Instead it was recognized that popular films have to address the interests and aspirations

of their target audiences, even if a particular film may seek to contain those interests and aspirations within specific terms. As a result, popular films will always attempt to resolve contradictory ideologies, rather than simply to promote a specific ideological position.

Gramsci's work also offered a way of rethinking cultural politics so that 'foreign' influences need no longer be seen as a threat to national political struggles. Gramsci's 'project for a radical and political sense of culture did not exclude commercial or American-inspired forms'.[19] This creates space to re-evaluate the relationship between British audiences and Hollywood cinema. If, as Gramsci suggests, national cultural traditions are often implicated in the maintenance of a cultural conservatism, then, as Chambers argues, 'foreign' influences might offer radical alternatives. Indeed, Hollywood might 'represent a more significant challenge to a native cultural hegemony than more local forms of opposition based on more traditional affiliations'.[20]

For example, as Miles and Smith's work demonstrates, British working-class audiences in the 1930s responded to the morality and class-bound character of British cinema by voting with their feet. Rejecting British films as boring, these audiences found that Hollywood offered sexy and strong heroes and heroines in contrast to the puritanism of British cinema. Furthermore, Hollywood offered a vision of a vibrant society that was apparently classless, a world in which change seemed possible. In this way, although Hollywood cinema may not be more democratic than British cinema, it offered British audiences 'a more extensive and imaginative sense of the possible'.[21]

Volosinov's importance was that his work enabled the Centre to develop and apply this approach in terms of language and textuality, terms which were necessary for the analysis of literary, televisual or film texts. While structuralism had seen the meanings of signs as solely the product of their relations to other signs, Volosinov argued that the meanings of signs were always in a process of change and development as different classes or groups struggled over these meanings. For example, the word 'freedom' does not simply gain its meaning from its relation to other signs, but is continually being fought over by different sections of society whose interests and aspirations lead them to define it in different ways. Similarly, words such as 'black' and 'queer' have been used to denigrate certain groups, but they have also been appropriated by these groups and invested with alternative meanings and significance. As Volosinov argued,

> Class does not coincide with the sign community, i.e. with the totality of users of the same set of signs of ideological communication. Thus various different classes will use one and the same language. As a result, differently oriented accents intersect in every ideological sign. Sign becomes an arena of the class struggle.[22]

As a result, the meanings of signs are always changing as they become the site of dialogue and debate between different classes and groups.

This position was also applied to 'utterances' or texts. Each text uses a language which pre-exists it, but reaccents that language. It is part of a process of dialogue and debate, and as such, each text is shaped through its response to other texts. Just as Gramsci's work argued that the dominant group can only win the consent of subordinate groups by addressing their interests and aspirations, Volosinov's work suggested that any text must include alternative positions if it is to respond to other texts. This situation means that no text is ever purely radical or conservative. Whatever its political ideology, it is always produced within conditions of power, and as such it must address alternative interests and aspirations if it is to present its own position as a solution to them.

For example, *Philadelphia*, the first mainstream Hollywood AIDS movie, attempts to portray a gay man with AIDS sympathetically and as a victim of prejudice and dicrimination rather than the disease. In order to achieve this, it has to engage with and answer other 'utterances' about gay men and AIDS. For example, the film counters the New Right's claims that both gays and AIDS are a threat to family values by continually locating the protagonist, Andrew Beckett, within a strong, supportive and caring family. The film engages with homophobia not only through the narrative, but by presenting the homophobic views of Beckett's attorney and showing how these views can be transformed. In this way, the film seeks to win support for its case that discrimination against gays is wrong. It achieves this both by engaging with, and attempting to displace, the homophobic views that underpin this discrimination and New Right definitions of 'family values'.

Popular films must not only address the interests and aspirations of their target audience (even if they seek to counter or contain their political implications), they also take elements of other films reworking them in different ways and so giving them different political inflections. This latter process is particularly clear in the case of film genres where similar narrative patterns and figures are reworked with very different political accents.[23]

For example, after the ways in which the film *Rambo*, became the object of violent criticism, action movies had to distance themselves carefully from associations with this film. For example, in *Die Hard*, the hero, John McClane (Bruce Willis), is taunted by the villain who accuses him of being 'an orphan of a bankrupt culture' and thinks he's 'Rambo'. McClane carefully deflects this association by choosing to identify himself with Roy Rogers, a self-effacing gesture which is able to distance his status as a male action hero from the negative associations of Rambo. In fact, even Sylvester Stallone has had to renegotiate his image in similar ways. In the film *Tango and Cash*, for example, not only does he carry a very small gun (one which is played off against the giant rocket-launcher which he carried on the poster for *Rambo*), but when one character associates him with the character of John Rambo, Stallone's character pointedly rejects the association.[24]

However, Volosinov's arguments about the multi-accentuality of the sign not only means that there will be differences between popular texts, it also means that audiences can respond to texts in different ways. It is here that the influence of Pierre Bourdieu is most pronounced, though it is often not explicitly acknowledged in the work from the Centre. For example, David Morley's work on television audiences is deeply dependent on Bourdieu's study of cultural competences and dispositions.

Bourdieu's analysis of cultural competences and dispositions was an attempt to explain how and why different classes and social groups consumed different cultural forms in different ways.[25] As was noted in chapter four, for Bourdieu, just as class differences are the product of differential access to economic capital, they are also produced through the unequal distribution of cultural capital. It is the amount and type of cultural capital which is possessed by a class which produces specific competences and dispositions. Cultural competences refer to the forms of skill and knowledge which enable one to make sense of certain types of material. For example, some groups may have the competence necessary for an understanding and appreciation of modernist art, but they may lack the competences necessary to make sense of Martial Arts movies. The differential distribution of cultural capital also means that different classes and social groups will have different dispositions; certain groups will be more disposed towards the consumption of avant-garde films and others will be more disposed towards the consumption of popular forms such as 'Carry On' films, action movies, or 'weepies'.

It is these dispositions which make people see certain types of film as 'for me' and other forms as 'not my sort of thing'.

As a result, Bourdieu does not see these differences as the result of individual tastes, but as the product of the ways in which people are socialized within specific classes, particularly through the agency of the family. While we may see our tastes as personal, natural and inherent to ourselves, Bourdieu argues that they are the product of wider (usually class-based) taste formations. (Bourdieu also suggests that the distribution of competences and dispositions is gendered, a point expanded upon in the work of critics such as Angela Partington and Ann Gray.)[26]

However, it is important to stress that Bourdieu is not simply arguing that subordinate sections of society are deprived of access to 'superior' forms of culture, quite the reverse. He is attempting to explain how and why different sections of society engage in different forms of cultural consumption, and the ways in which these differences are both the product of certain power relations and can also help to reproduce and justify those relations. Not only do different sections of society have different forms of cultural consumption, but these different forms of consumption are used to distinguish one group from another. For example, dominant groups often justify their dominance over others by reference to their 'superior' tastes, while subordinate groups will often reject these supposedly 'superior' tastes as 'arty-farty'. As Bourdieu puts it, bourgeois taste is usually defined through its rejection of popular tastes, while popular tastes are usually defined though a rejection of that rejection. As a result, taste formations are not simply produced out of the interests of a specific class or social group, but out of the struggles *between* classes and groups.

Audiences, interpretations and the activities of cultural consumption

As a result of the influence of Gramsci, Volosinov and Bourdieu, many of those associated with the Centre argued that one cannot deduce a particular ideological effect from an analysis of the formal features of a text or group of texts. Instead they stressed that different audiences make different responses on the basis of their specific cultural competences and dispositions. As many critics from the Centre have pointed out, the problem with much work on popular culture is not only that it obscures differences between texts, but also that it tends to present the audience as a homogeneous and passive mass. However, members

of a film audience, for example, have a history which has constructed them as social subjects prior to their encounter with a particular film, and they will have attitudes and opinions which have been shaped by this history. As a result, while a film might have a 'preferred reading' which seeks to elicit certain responses from its audience, real audiences are not compelled to respond in this way. They may accept the film's ideological position, but they may also qualify or even reject that position.

For example, in his highly influential article 'Encoding/Decoding', Hall outlines three categories of audience responses: 'dominant', 'negotiated' and 'oppositional' readings.[27] The dominant reading, it is argued, uncritically accepts the text's 'preferred meaning'. (At this stage, it was still assumed that media texts necessarily presented dominant or hegemonic ideological positions.) People who produce the oppositional reading, Hall argues, challenge the positions presented by the text and articulate their opposition to these positions. The negotiated reading, on the other hand, is claimed to be the most common, and, it is argued, falls somewhere between the other two readings. While not always completely opposed to the dominant ideological positions present in the text, it does not simply accept them either. Negotiated readings may acknowledge contradictory evidence, which may be the product of the viewer's own experience, but define such evidence as merely an exception to the rule. For example, a viewer who has been harassed by a policeman may watch a news report which praises the police and denies that they harass people. In such a situation, he might accept the news report and believe that his own experience was simply the result of 'one bad apple'.

Although the Centre acknowledged the importance of the audiences, it did not reject textual analysis. This is illustrated by David Morley and Charlotte Brunsdon's *Everyday Television* which uses semiotics to analyse the television programme *Nationwide*. However, for Morley and Brunsdon this semiotic analysis was not used to provide a definitive reading of the text and its effects upon its audience. Instead it was simply seen as 'a base line against which differential readings might be posed'.[28] In other words, it was a first stage in a research process which would include an interrogation of the readings which specific audience groups made of this text. This did not mean that Morley and Brunsdon thought that any text could be read in any way. On the contrary, they argued that texts did have preferred readings, but that the social history of audience members will affect their interpretation of, and

responses to, these preferred readings. Therefore, Morley and Brunsdon rejected the assumption within screen theory that the dominant ideology was guaranteed simply because a viewer watching a film was being 'positioned by the text'. Instead, they argued that it was also a matter of what position the text presented, and how the viewer responded to that position. As Morley puts it, domination is not secured solely through 'the successful positioning of the subject in the signifying process (the same signification or position is compatible with different ideological problematics; successful positioning in the chain of signification is not a guarantee of dominant decodings); but also because of the acceptance of what is said.'[29]

However, the different ways in which audiences interpret or decode a text are not just a result of whether they accept or reject a text's ideological position. As Morley argues, the relevance/irrelevance and comprehension/incomprehension of specific types of material must also be taken into account.[30] In this way, the effect of a text is also related to whether or not people choose to view these texts, and whether or not they are able to make sense of them. For example, an avant-garde film will not have the effect which many film theorists identify as the product of its formal features unless one is familiar with the theories and conventions of avant-garde cinema. But, in the same way, familiarity with the avant-garde will not equip one to make sense of popular cinema.

This may also help to explain why people so often find the tastes of others so incomprehensible. They literally do not comprehend what others see in the texts which they choose to consume. This sense of incomprehension is also related to whether or not people view a film as relevant to them or not. If they do not believe that it 'speaks to them', they may not only refuse to see the film, but also be hostile in their interpretation of it if they do see it. This not only applies to people who may justifiably feel that art-house films are 'not for people like me', but also relates to issues such as genre. It has often been claimed that different genres appeal to different genders, and while such gendered divisions are never absolute, there are good reasons why women may tend to see war films as irrelevant to their lives, or men tend to see domestic dramas as irrelevant to them. In such a situation, even if the power relations involved in such divisions do not produce a hostile response, a film's irrelevance to the viewer will make it unlikely that its ideological concerns will have much purchase or impact upon the viewer.

However, cultural studies has not simply been concerned with the

competences and dispositions of audiences. As Morley has pointed out, the social situation of the viewer may also affect decoding and interpretation in other ways. For example, he felt dissatisfied with *The 'Nationwide' Audience* because he had not been able to examine the different responses which might be made by the same people within the different contexts of the workplace and the home. As a result, by the time he published *Family Television* he claimed that his 'focus of interest [had] shifted from the analysis of the patterns of differential "readings" of particular programme materials, to the analysis of the domestic viewing context itself – as the framework within which "readings" of programmes are (ordinarily) made.'[31] His point was that the meaning of cultural consumption cannot be limited to the interpretation or decoding of particular texts. For this reason he refers to Janice Radway who has suggested that whether the genre of romantic fiction is ideologically conservative or not, the activity of reading romantic fiction is often a form of resistance through which women are able to escape the demands made upon them in the domestic sphere. As Radway has argued, 'The significance of the act of reading itself might, under some conditions, contradict, undercut, or qualify the significance of producing a particular kind of story.'[32] As a result, Morley has argued that one of the problems which film studies faces has been its tendency to concentrate on the 'object viewed' rather than the 'context of viewing'; the film rather than, say, the 'picture palace'. As he puts it,

> There is more to cinema-going than seeing films. There is going out at night and the sense of relaxation combined with the sense of fun and excitement. The very name 'picture palace', by which cinemas were known for a long time, captures an important part of that experience. Rather than selling individual films, cinema is best understood as having sold a habit, a certain type of socialized experience ... Any analysis of the film subject which does not take on board these issues of the context within which the film is consumed is, to my mind, insufficient. Unfortunately a great deal of film theory has operated without reference to these issues, given the effect of the literary tradition in prioritizing the status of the text itself abstracted from the viewing context.[33]

This point seems central given that films are now viewed in so many different contexts: at the cinema; on network television; via satellite or cable; and on video. The meaning of any of these different contexts may well be very different.

However, Morley also suggests other ways of thinking about the context of consumption. People go to the cinema on dates, for a night out

with the gang, or to fill a free afternoon. Couples may watch a film together as a way of winding down before sleep. All these contexts have different meanings which will affect the viewer's decoding, but which is not determined by that decoding.

The transition from *The 'Nationwide' Audience* to *Family Television* also marks another transition in the work associated with the Centre. Its initial work on the media had tended to concentrate on the sphere of news and current affairs programmes, but by the 1980s there was a growing interest in popular fictional programming. This transition was the product of changing conceptions of politics within the period. In the early stage, news and current affairs programming were seen as dealing with 'serious' political and ideological struggles. They were about government, labour disputes, and the policing of society. They also provided a useful way of examining the relationships between media institutions and the state. The influence of feminist work at the Centre helped to shift this focus. This work often refused the definition of the 'political' which limited politics to the public sphere, and in contrast it emphasized the political nature of the personal and domestic sphere. As a result, popular fictional programming was not seen as a distraction from 'real' politics but became a way of investigating the ways in which 'the contradictions of everyday life and popular experience' were worked through in relation to popular media.

These transitions were also related to a third transition. Despite the importance of Gramsci during the 1970s, the Centre had still tended to assume that the popular texts produced by media industries such as broadcasting, publishing and the film industry necessarily reproduced the dominant ideology – even if they stressed that they must include oppositional elements and could be resisted or challenged by audiences. The influence of feminism in particular tended to challenge this assumption. Instead of identifying media texts as an expression of the dominant ideology, later work from the Centre tended to reject this simple formulation.

In fact, as Hall points out, there is no actual fixed content of popular culture. It is not a series of objects whose status is fixed and unchanging, but rather the manner in which objects are defined and consumed. For example, a text which in one historical period was seen as popular may later be redefined as an example of high art. The case of Shakespeare is often used here, but it also applies to many more recent texts. For example, the melodramas of Douglas Sirk were often dismissed by critics during the period in which they were produced.

They were seen as displaying the clichéd and formulaic features associated with popular film. But during the 1970s auteur critics and psychoanalytic feminists appropriated and virtually 'canonized' these texts. Instead of clichéd and formulaic examples of popular culture, they were redefined as subtle and radical films which took the supposedly conservative forms of popular melodrama, and through the stylistic techniques of irony and distanciation, subverted their ideological project. In this way, Sirk's films were no longer seen as sharing the formal features associated with a conservative popular culture, but as texts whose formal features established their difference and distinction from popular film.[34]

Indeed, a text may even have different readerships at the same moment. This is illustrated by the case of *Psycho*. Initially it was derided as a sick and degraded work of popular horror, but it was very quickly appropriated within film studies as a major work of great aesthetic significance. None the less, it has continued to occupy an important space within popular culture as is shown by the number of sequels, imitations and allusions to it which have been made over the years. It has therefore acquired contradictory and opposed meanings within culture. It has been seen by some as an exemplary instance of all that is right or wrong with popular film, but in much the same way as Sirk's films, it has also been seen as an example of film 'art' which is defined by its difference and distinction from popular film.

Conclusion

So the simple distinction between popular film and the avant-garde found in much writing on film becomes untenable. The meaning and political significance of texts are not simply inscribed in their formal features, but are defined through their appropriation or rejection by different groups. The distinction between popular film and the avant-garde is not simply a property of individual texts or groups of texts. It is a product of the cultural distinctions through which the tastes of certain groups are rejected and the tastes of others acquire authority. As a result, texts can be deployed and redeployed in different ways. They can be appropriated or rejected, but the same text may at different moments be identified as displaying the textual features of a radical avant-garde or a conservative popular culture.

This critique of the distinction between a radical avant-garde and an ideologically conservative popular culture is important to the study of

popular film because film studies has been so dependent on this kind of distinction. In fact, as Bourdieu's work suggests, the distinction between the popular and the avant-garde is itself a product of economic and cultural power. The idea that popular culture is ideological and conservative is necessary so that dominant social groups can define their own tastes as 'superior' and so win authority over others.

Notes:

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2 Pam Cook, *The Cinema Book*, London: British Film Institute, 1985.
3 Raymond Williams, 'Culture is Ordinary' in Ann Gray and Jim McGuigan, eds, *Studying Culture: An Introductory Reader*, London: Edward Arnold, 1993, pp. 5–14.
4 'Culture is Ordinary', p. 7.
5 Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1958.
6 Stuart Laing, *Representations of Working Class Life, 1959–64*, London: Macmillan, 1986, p. 217.
7 Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965, p. 58.
8 E. P. Thompson, '"The Long Revolution" Part 1', *New Left Review*, nos. 9–10 (1961).
9 E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963.
10 See Peter Miles and Malcolm Smith, *Cinema, Literature and Society*, London: Croom Helm, 1987.
11 Iain Chambers, *Border Dialogues: Journeys in Postmodernity*, London: Routledge, 1990, p. 40–1.
12 Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms', in Richard Collins *et al.*, eds, *Media, Culture and Society: A Reader*, London: Sage, 1986, pp. 33–48.
13 'Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms', p. 45.
14 'Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms', p. 45.
15 See Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971.
16 Stuart Hall *et al.*, *Resistance through Rituals*, London: Hutchinson, 1976.
17 Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.
18 Tony Bennett, 'Introduction: Popular Culture and "the Turn to Gramsci"' in Tony Bennett *et al.*, *Popular Culture and Social Relations*, Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986, p. xiii.
19 *Border Dialogues*, p. 44.
20 *Border Dialogues*, p. 44.

21 *Border Dialogues*, p. 42.
22 V. N. Volosinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, (originally published 1929), Seminar Press, 1973, p. 23.
23 See, for example, Mark Jancovich, *Horror*, London: Batsford, 1992.
24 For discussions of masculinity in the action genre, see Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Movie*, London: Routledge, 1993; and Andy Willis, *Jean Claude Van Damme: A Study of Masculinity, the Male Body and Martial Arts Cinema*, M.A. dissertation, Thames Valley University, 1994.
25 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, London: Routledge, 1984.
26 Ann Gray, *Video Playtime: The Gendering of a Communication Technology*, London: Routledge, 1992; and Angela Partington, 'Melodrama's Gendered Audience', in *Off-Centre: Feminism and Cultural Studies*, London: HarperCollins, 1991, pp. 49–68.
27 Stuart Hall, 'Encoding/Decoding', in Stuart Hall *et al.*, eds, *Culture, Media, Language*, London: Unwin Hyman, 1980, pp. 128–38.
28 David Morley and Charlotte Brunsdon, *Everyday Television: Nationwide*, London: British Film Institute, 1978, p. v.
29 *The 'Nationwide' Audience*, p. 153.
30 David Morley, *Family Television: Cultural Power and Domestic Leisure*, London: Comedia, 1986.
31 *Family Television*, p. 14.
32 Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature*, London: Verso, 1987, p. 210.
33 David Morley, *Television, Audience and Cultural Studies*, London: Routledge, 1992, pp. 157–8.
34 See Christine Gledhill, ed., *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Women's Film*, London: British Film Institute, 1987.