

CHAPTER 1

Understanding Popular Culture

POPULAR CULTURE

This book consists of a number of analyses of popular culture in practice. In their various ways they all, I hope, shed some light on the meanings and pleasures we generate and circulate as we live our everyday lives. Culture is the constant process of producing meanings of and from our social experience, and such meanings necessarily produce a social identity for the people involved. Making sense of anything involves making sense of the person who is the agent in the process; sense making dissolves differences between subject and object and constructs each in relation to the other. Within the production and circulation of these meanings lies pleasure.

Culture making (and culture is always in process, never achieved) is a social process: all meanings of self, of social relations, all the discourses and texts that play such important cultural roles can circulate only in relationship to the social system, in our case that of white, patriarchal capitalism. Any social system needs a cultural system of meanings that serves either to hold it in place or destabilize it, to make it more or less amenable to change. Culture (and its meanings and pleasures) is a constant succession of social practices; it is therefore inherently political, it is centrally involved in the distribution and possible redistribution of various forms of social power. Popular culture is made by various formations of subordinated or disempowered people out of the resources, both discursive

and material, that are provided by the social system that disempowers them. It is therefore contradictory and conflictual to its core. The resources—television, records, clothes, video games, language—carry the interests of the economically and ideologically dominant; they have lines of force within them that are hegemonic and that work in favor of the status quo. But hegemonic power is necessary, or even possible, only because of resistance, so these resources must also carry contradictory lines of force that are taken up and activated differently by people situated differently within the social system. If the cultural commodities or texts do not contain resources out of which the people can make their own meanings of their social relations and identities, they will be rejected and will fail in the marketplace. They will not be made popular.

Popular culture is made by subordinated peoples in their own interests out of resources that also, contradictorily, serve the economic interests of the dominant. Popular culture is made from within and below, not imposed from without or above as mass cultural theorists would have it. There is always an element of popular culture that lies outside social control, that escapes or opposes hegemonic forces. Popular culture is always a culture of conflict, it always involves the struggle to make social meanings that are in the interests of the subordinate and that are not those preferred by the dominant ideology. The victories, however fleeting or limited, in this struggle produce popular pleasure, for popular pleasure is always social and political.

Popular culture is made in relationship to structures of dominance. This relationship can take two main forms—that of resistance or evasion. The girl fans of Madonna (Chapter 5a) are resisting the patriarchal meanings of female sexuality and constructing their own oppositional ones; the boys in video arcades (Chapter 4) are similarly making their own resistant meanings of human-machine relations and power structures. But surfers (Chapter 3) are evading social discipline, evading ideological control and positioning. Evasion and resistance are interrelated, and neither is possible without the other: both involve the interplay of pleasure and meaning, but evasion is more pleasurable than meaningful, whereas resistance produces meanings before pleasures.

Making popular culture out of television news, for instance, is possible and pleasurable only if the subordinate can make their meanings out of it, otherwise the news would be part of dominant, hegemonic culture only. So the news of a snow storm (Chapter 7) or of Israeli troops quelling an uprising by Arab youths (Chapter 8) can be made popular only if it offers meanings that are relevant to the everyday lives of subordinate people, and these meanings will be pleasurable only if they are made *out of* the news, not *by* the news. These productive pleasures of making one's own sense are different in emphasis from the evasive, offensive pleasures of the body experienced by surfers or video game players.

Popular culture is always in process; its meanings can never be identified in a text, for texts are activated, or made meaningful, only in social relations and in intertextual relations. This activation of the meaning potential of a text can occur only in the social and cultural relationships into which it enters. The social relationships of texts occur at their moment of reading as they are inserted into the everyday lives of the readers. Shopping malls are quite different texts for women and for unemployed youths, because their social relationships differ in each case (see Chapter 2): for women, malls are legitimate, unthreatening public places, that are opposed to both the street and the home; for unemployed youths, they are a place to trick "the system," to consume the images, warmth, and places of consumerism, without buying any of its commodities. The meanings of shopping malls are made and circulated in social practices.

But they are also made intertextually: bumper stickers announcing, "A woman's place is in the mall," coffee mugs decorated with the words "mall rats," or T-shirts that proclaim the pathology of the "shop-a-holic" can be used defiantly, skeptically, critically, and variously, according to their many uses—a father giving a T-shirt to his teenage daughter would set up a series of meanings that would differ significantly from those generated by it as a gift from one of her friends. The culture of shopping malls, as of Madonna, as of the beach, cannot be read off the primary texts themselves, but only in their social uses and in their relationships with other texts. The postcards we send are as much a part of the meaning of the

beach as our use of it to expose ourselves to the sun and sight of others; Madonna's posters are as much a part of her meanings and pleasures as her songs and videos. The fan decorating her bedroom with Madonna icons, the wanna-bes (Madonna look-alikes) striding down the sidewalk, are agents in "Madonna culture," their texts (the bedroom, their bodies) as signifying as any of Madonna herself. The meanings of popular culture exist only in their circulation, not in their texts; the texts, which are crucial in this process, need to be understood not for and by themselves but in their interrelationships with other texts and with social life, for that is how their circulation is ensured.

POPULAR PRODUCTIVITY AND DISCRIMINATION

The art of popular culture is "the art of making do." The people's subordination means that they cannot produce the resources of popular culture, but they do make their culture from those resources. Commodities make an economic profit for their producers and distributors, but their cultural function is not adequately explained by their economic function, however dependent it may be on it. The cultural industries are often thought of as those that produce our films, music, television, publications, and so on, but all industries are cultural industries to a greater or lesser extent: a pair of jeans (see *Understanding Popular Culture*, Chapter 1) or a piece of furniture is as much a cultural text as a pop record. All commodities are consumed as much for their meanings, identities, and pleasures as they are for their material function.

Our culture is a commodity culture, and it is fruitless to argue against it on the basis that culture and profit are mutually exclusive terms—that what is profitable for some cannot be cultural for others. Behind such arguments lie two romantic fantasies that originate at opposite ends of the cultural spectrum—at one end that of the penniless artist, dedicated only to the purity and aesthetic transcendence of his (for the vision is a patriarchal one) art, and at the other that of a folk art

in which all members of the tribe participate equally in producing and circulating their culture, free of any commercial taint. Neither of these fantasies has much historical basis, and neither of them is any help at all in understanding the popular culture of capitalist societies. The cultural dimensions of industries are where their dominance is at its shakiest: they know that people have to eat, to wear clothes, to be able to transport themselves, but they are much less sure in determining what or why they want to eat, wear, or travel in. The cultural industries, by which I mean all industries, have to produce a repertoire of products from which the people choose. And choose they do; most estimates of the failure rate for new products—whether primarily cultural, such as movies or records, or more material commodities—are as high as 80–90 percent despite extensive advertising (and the prime function of our enormous publicity industry is to try to ensure the cultural circulation of economic commodities—that is, to exploit the cultural dimension of commodities for the economic profit of their producers). But, despite all the pressures, it is the people who finally choose which commodities they will use in their culture.

These pressures are not merely economic. The beach, for instance, is not a commodity to be bought and sold, and neither are the public rest areas of shopping malls or the view of Sears Tower from the freeway. But the absence of economic power does not mean the absence of social or hegemonic power. As I show in Chapters 3 and 4, attempts to control the meanings, pleasures, and behaviors of the subordinate are always there, and popular culture has to accommodate them in a constant interplay of power and resistance, discipline and indiscipline, order and disorder.

Much of this struggle is a struggle for meanings, and popular texts can ensure their popularity only by making themselves inviting terrains for this struggle; the people are unlikely to choose any commodity that serves only the economic and ideological interests of the dominant. So popular texts are structured in the tension between forces of closure (or domination) and openness (or popularity). In *Understanding Popular Culture*, Chapter 5, I theorize some of the forces of openness; in this book I try to trace them at work. So popular culture is full

of puns whose meanings multiply and escape the norms of the social order and overflow their discipline; its excess offers opportunities for parody, subversion, or inversion; it is obvious and superficial, refusing to produce the deep, complexly crafted texts that narrow down their audiences and social meanings; it is tasteless and vulgar, for taste is social control and class interest masquerading as a naturally finer sensibility; it is shot through with contradictions, for contradictions require the productivity of the reader to make his or her sense out of them.) It often centers on the body and its sensations rather than on the mind and its sense, for the bodily pleasures offer carnivalesque, evasive, liberating practices—they constitute the popular terrain where hegemony is weakest, a terrain that may possibly lie beyond its reach.

Popular texts are inadequate in themselves—they are never self-sufficient structures of meanings (as some will argue highbrow texts to be), they are provokers of meanings and pleasure, they are completed only when taken up by people and inserted into their everyday culture. The people make popular culture at the interface between everyday life and the consumption of the products of the cultural industries.

The aim of this productivity is, therefore, to produce meanings that are relevant to everyday life. Relevance is central to popular culture, for it minimizes the difference between text and life, between the aesthetic and the everyday that is so central to a process- and practice-based culture (such as the popular) rather than a text- or performance-based one (such as the bourgeois, highbrow one) (see *Understanding Popular Culture*, Chapter 6). Relevance can be produced only by the people, for only they can know which texts enable them to make the meanings that will function in their everyday lives. Relevance also means that much popular culture is ephemeral—as the social conditions of the people change, so do the texts and tastes from which relevances can be produced.

Relevance is the intersection between the textual and the social. It is therefore a site of struggle, for relevances are dispersed, and as divergent as the social situations of the people: the popular text, therefore, has to work against its differences to find a commonality between divergent social groups in order to maximize its consumption and profitability.

There is also a struggle over relevance itself, particularly in the function of news in popular culture. Though there are many similarities between entertainment and information, and hard-and-fast distinctions between them are as useless as they are popular among TV schedulers, power does work differently in each. There are few who now believe that it is in the national interest to control the entertainment of the people so as to improve their taste (which means, in practice, to do away with popular tastes and reduce them all to bourgeois ones), but there are much more solidly grounded arguments that there is information the people *need* to have if democracy is to flourish. A politically ignorant or apathetic electorate will be unable to produce high-caliber politicians. So television news, for example, is caught in the tension between the need to convey information deemed to be in the public interest and the need to be popular. It attempts to meet these contradictory needs by being socially responsible in content, but popular in form and presentation, and thus runs the risk of being judged boring and irrelevant from one side, and superficial and rushed from the other. It is caught between competing relevancies at the national (or global) level and at the local level of everyday life, and can be judged to be successful only when it manages to merge the two into one. In Chapters 7 and 8, I trace the interplay of power, knowledge, pleasure, and popularity in the news as social responsibility and discipline meet popular productivity and relevance.

POLITICS

Popular culture is the culture of the subordinate who resent their subordination; it is not concerned with finding consensual meanings or with producing social rituals that harmonize social difference, as the liberal pluralists would have it. Equally, however, it is not the culture of subordination that massifies or commodifies people into the victimized dupes of capitalism, as mass cultural theorists propose. Different though these two arguments are, they both find in popular culture only those

forces that work in favor of the status quo—the liberal pluralists may define this in terms of a consensus, and the mass culturalists in terms of the power of the dominant classes, but neither argument allows popular culture to work as an agent of destabilization or as a redistributor of the balance of social power toward the disempowered. They are therefore inadequate.

Popular culture is structured within what Stuart Hall (1981) calls the opposition between the power-bloc and the people. The power-bloc consists of a relatively unified, relatively stable alliance of social forces—economic, legal, moral, aesthetic; the people, on the other hand, is a diverse and dispersed set of social allegiances constantly formed and reformed among the formations of the subordinate. The opposition can also be thought of as one between *homogeneity*, as the power-bloc attempts to control, structure, and minimize social differences so that they serve its interests, and *heterogeneity*, as the formations of the people intransigently maintain their sense of social difference that is also a difference of interest. It can be thought of as the opposition between the center and the circumference, between centripetal and centrifugal forces, or, more belligerently, as the conflict between an occupying army and guerrilla fighters, as de Certeau (1984) and Eco (1986) characterize it. But the relationship is always one of conflict or confrontation; the hegemonic forces of homogeneity are always met by the resistances of heterogeneity.

These resistances take various forms that differ in their social visibility, in their social positioning, and in their activity. It could be argued that the least politically active are the bodily pleasures of evasion, the dogged refusal of the dominant ideology and its discipline, and the ability to construct a set of experiences beyond its reach. Surfers and video game players "lose" their socially constructed identities and therefore the structure of domination-subordination in their moments of *jouissance* when the intensity of bodily concentration-pleasure becomes orgasmic (see Chapters 3 and 4). Other evasive, offensive pleasures are those of the carnivalesque, of exaggerated, liberating fun (see Chapter 6 and *Understanding Popular Culture*, Chapters 3 and 4) that inverts social norms and momentarily disrupts their power.

There are arguments that such evasive or carnivalesque pleasures are merely safety valves that finally serve to maintain the current structure of power by providing licensed, contained, controlled means of expressing resentment. There are similar arguments against the political effectivity of semiotic or interior resistances that occur within a realm of fantasy that is constructed outside and against the forces of ideological subjection (see Chapter 5b). These arguments hold that because such resistance occurs within the realm of the individual rather than that of the social it is defused, made safe, and thus contained comfortably within the system. But what these arguments fail to take into account is the politics of everyday life that occur on the micro rather than macro level; they fail equally to account for the differences and potential connections between interior, semiotic resistances and sociopolitical ones, between meanings and behaviors, between progressiveness and radicalism, between evasive and offensive tactics. These are the issues and relationships that are central to the politics of popular culture, and theories that fail to address them can never offer us adequate insights.

Theories of ideology or hegemony stress the power of the dominant to construct the subjectivities of the subordinate and the common sense of society in their own interests. Their power is the power to have their meanings of self and of social relations accepted or consented to by the people. At the most basic level, evading this power or inverting it is an act of defiance, for any expression of meanings that establish conflictual social differences maintains and legitimates those meanings and those differences. The threat to the power of the dominant is evidenced by their constant attempts to control, delegitimize, and disparage the pleasures of the people. But despite centuries of legal, moral, and aesthetic repression (see *Understanding Popular Culture*, Chapter 4), the everyday culture of the people, often transmitted orally, has maintained these evasive, resistant popular forces without which more active resistances would have no base and no motivation. Evasion is the foundation of resistance; avoiding capture, either ideological or physical, is the first duty of the guerrilla.

The basic power of the dominant in capitalism may be economic, but this economic power is both underpinned and

exceeded by semiotic power, that is, the power to make meanings. So semiotic resistance that not only refuses the dominant meanings but constructs oppositional ones that serve the interests of the subordinate is as vital a base for the redistribution of power as is evasion. The ability to think differently, to construct one's own meanings of self and of social relations, is the necessary ground without which no political action can hope to succeed. The minority who are active at the macro level of politics can claim to be the representatives of a social movement only if they can touch this base of semiotic resistance of people "thinking differently." Without this, they can all too easily be marginalized as extremists or agitators and their political effectiveness neutralized. The interior resistance of fantasy is more than ideologically evasive, it is a necessary base for social action.

But such action does not occur only at the organized macropolitical level; it occurs, too, in the minutiae of everyday life. Indeed, the politics of popular culture are much more effective and visible at the micro than the macro level, for this is their most sympathetic terrain.

Semiotic resistance results from the desire of the subordinate to exert control over the meanings of their lives, a control that is typically denied them in their material social conditions. This, again, is politically crucial, for without some control over one's existence there can be no empowerment and no self-esteem. And with no sense of empowerment or self-esteem there can be none of the confidence needed for social action, even at the micro level. So Radway (1984) found a woman romance reader whose reading empowered her to the extent that she felt better able to resist the patriarchal demands made upon her by her marriage, and D'Acci (1988) found women fans of *Cagney & Lacey* of all ages who reported that the sense of self-empowerment produced by their fandom enabled them to promote their own interests more effectively in their everyday lives (see *Understanding Popular Culture*, Chapter 7). So the provocation offered by Madonna (Chapter 5a) to young girls to take control of the meanings of their femininity produces a sense of empowerment in one of the most disempowered of social groups that may well result in political progress in their everyday lives—in their relationships with their boyfriends

or parents, in their refusal to give up the street to men as their territory.

Such political gains in the specificities of everyday life are progressive rather than radical. They enlarge the space of action for the subordinate; they effect shifts, however minute, in social power relations. They are the tactics of the subordinate in making do within and against the system, rather than of opposing it directly; they are concerned with improving the lot of the subordinate rather than with changing the system that subordinates them.

This is controversial territory, for there are those who would argue that such tactics finally serve to strengthen the system and to delay any radical change in it. If this argument is followed to its extreme, it would propose that the more the subordinate suffer the better, because their suffering is more likely to provoke the conditions for radical reform. This may well be theoretically correct, but it is hardly popular. It also rests upon a caricature of capitalism, that the system is not only unfair in its distribution of power and resources (which it *is*), but also totally inhumane in its exploitation of the weak (which it is not, in general, although U.S. capitalism does treat certain groups such as those who are both poor and mentally sick with something close to total inhumanity).

The reverse side of theories proposing that popular culture is at best a safety valve and at worst an opiate is the implication that a different sort of culture could provoke radical social reform. Such assumptions, unstated though they frequently are, are utopian. It is material historical conditions that produce radical reform; evasive and semiotic resistances can maintain a popular consciousness that can fertilize the growth of those conditions and can be ready to exploit them when they arise, but they cannot in themselves produce such conditions. But the resistances of popular culture are not just evasive or semiotic: they do have a social dimension at the micro level. And at this micro level they may well act as a constant erosive force upon the macro, weakening the system from within so that it is more amenable to change at the structural level. One wonders, for instance, how effective the attempts to improve the legal status of women would have been if it had not been for the constant erosion of millions of women working to improve the micro-

political conditions of their everyday lives. It is arguable that the needs of the people are better met by progressive social change originating in evasive or interior resistance, moving to action at the micropolitical level and from there to more organized assaults on the system itself, than by radical or revolutionary change. Western patriarchal capitalism has proved remarkably able to prevent the social conditions that provoke effective radical action, and to contain such radical attempts that have been made upon it. It appears to be much more vulnerable to guerrilla raids than to strategic assaults, and it is here we must look for the politics of popular culture.

CHAPTER 2

Shopping for Pleasure

MALLS, POWER, AND RESISTANCE

Shopping malls are cathedrals of consumption—a glib phrase that I regret the instant it slides off my pen. The metaphor of consumerism as a religion, in which commodities become the icons of worship and the rituals of exchanging money for goods become a secular equivalent of holy communion, is simply too glib to be helpful, and too attractive to those whose intentions, whether they be moral or political, are to expose the evils and limitations of bourgeois materialism. And yet the metaphor *is* both attractive and common precisely because it does convey and construct a knowledge of consumerism; it does point to one set of “truths,” however carefully selected a set.

Truths compete in a political arena, and the truths that the consumerism-as-contemporary-religion strives to suppress are those that deny the difference between the tenor and vehicle of the metaphor. Metaphor always works within that tense area within which the forces of similarity and difference collide, and aligns itself with those of similarity. Metaphor constructs similarity out of difference, and when a metaphor becomes a cliché, as the shopping mall-cathedral one has, then a resisting reading must align itself with the differences rather than the similarities, for clichés become clichés only because of their centrality to common sense: the cliché helps to construct the commonality of common sense.

So, the differences: the religious congregation is powerless, led like sheep through the rituals and meanings, forced to