

Cultural Studies and Social Theory: A Critical Intervention

Douglas Kellner

(<http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/kellner.html>)

Within the traditions of critical social theory and cultural criticism, there are many models of cultural studies. Both classical and contemporary social theory have engaged the relationships between culture and society, and provided a variety of types of studies of culture. From this perspective, there are neo-Marxian models of cultural studies ranging from the Frankfurt School to Althusserian paradigms; there are neo-Weberian, neo-Durkheimian, poststructuralist, and feminist studies of culture; and there are a wide range of eclectic approaches that apply distinctive social theories to the study of culture.

The term "cultural studies," however, has been most clearly associated in recent years with the work of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies and its offshoots, so my discussion will focus on its work and its immediate predecessors -- although I will argue that the Frankfurt School anticipated many of the positions of British cultural studies. In the following study, I accordingly examine the specific origins of British cultural studies, its genesis and trajectory, and imbrication with social theory. My argument will be that cultural studies requires social theory and that cultural studies in turn is a crucial part of a critical theory of society.

Origins of British Cultural Studies

From within a thoroughly British context, immediate precursors of British cultural studies created a critique of mass culture in some ways parallel to the work of the Frankfurt School, while more positively valorizing traditions of working class culture and resistance. Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, and E.P. Thompson sought to affirm working class culture against onslaughts of mass culture produced by the culture industries. Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* (1957) contrasted the vitality of British working class institutions and life with the artificiality of the products of the culture industry that were seen as a banal homogenization of British life and a colonization of its culture by heavily-American influenced institutions and cultural forms.

During the same era, Raymond Williams developed an expanded conception of culture that went beyond the literary conceptions dominant in the British academy, conceptualizing culture as "a whole way of life," that encompasses modes of sensibility, values, and practices, as well as artifacts (1958 and 1961). Arguing for the need to think together "culture and society," seeing the importance of media culture, and overcoming the division between high and low culture, Williams produced an impressive series of publications that deeply influenced the trajectory of British cultural studies. He polemicized against the concept of the masses which he claimed was both condescending and elitist -- as well as overly homogenizing, covering over real and important differences. This theme in turn came to run through the cultural populism which helped shape and distinguish British cultural studies.

British cultural studies was also shaped by E.P. Thompson's studies of the English working class culture and valorization of forms of resistance (1963). Like Williams and Hoggart, Thompson

interpreted the vicissitudes of English culture as a response to industrialization and urbanization; all three valorized cultural values that criticized the excesses and horrors of urban-industrial development and all saw culture as a potentially positive force, that could uplift and improve people. They were also strong democrats, seeing culture as an important force of democracy and were anti-elitist, opposing conservative traditions of cultural criticism in England. Williams and Hoggart were intensely involved in projects of working class education and oriented toward socialist politics, seeing their form of cultural studies as an instrument of progressive social change. Their critiques of Americanism and mass culture paralleled to some extent the earlier critique of the Frankfurt school, yet valorized a working class that the Frankfurt school saw as defeated in Germany and much of Europe during the era of fascism and which they never saw as a strong resource for emancipatory social change.

The democratic and socialist humanism of Thompson, Williams, and Hoggart would influence the early Birmingham project that would continue their critique of modern culture and would seek forms of resistance to capitalist modernization. The initial work of the Birmingham school was continuous with the radicalism of the first wave of British cultural studies (the Hoggart-Thompson-Williams "culture and society" tradition) as well, in important ways, with the Frankfurt school (Kellner 1997b). The Birmingham group also continued to open the study of culture to social theory and to develop an approach to culture that involved social contextualization and critique.

The school of cultural studies that has become a global phenomenon of great importance over the last decade was inaugurated by the University of Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in 1964, whose director was Richard Hoggart, followed by Stuart Hall from 1968 to 1979. During its "heroic period" in the 1960s and 1970s, the Centre developed a variety of critical approaches for the analysis, interpretation, and criticism of cultural artifacts, combining sociological theory and contextualization with literary analysis of cultural texts. Curiously, Hoggart and Hall's recollections of the reception of their enterprise by the sociology department vary. Hoggart recalls that: "the sociologists in fact were very charitable. They said, right through, 'this is interesting stuff and we can learn from it'" (cited in Corner 1991: 146). Hall recalls, however, that Hoggart's inaugural address "triggered off a blistering attack specifically from sociology [which] reserved a proprietary claim over the territory" and that the opening of the Centre was greeted by a letter from two social scientists who warned: "if Cultural Studies overstepped its proper limits and took in the study of contemporary society (not just its texts) without 'proper' scientific controls, it would provoke reprisals for illegitimately crossing the territorial boundary" (1980a: 21).

Of course, the Birmingham School refused to be policed and resolutely undertook sustained investigation of both culture and society. The now classical period of British cultural studies from the early 1960s to the early 1980s adopted a Marxian approach to the study of culture, one especially influenced by Althusser and Gramsci (see Hall 1980a). Through a set of internal debates, and responding to social struggles and movements of the 1960s and the 1970s, the Birmingham group came to concentrate on the interplay of representations and ideologies of class, gender, race, ethnicity, and nationality in cultural texts, especially concentrating on media culture. They were among the first to study the effects of newspapers, radio, television, film, and other popular cultural forms on audiences. They also engaged how assorted audiences interpreted

and used media culture in varied and different ways and contexts, analyzing the factors that made audiences respond in contrasting ways to media texts.

From the beginning, British cultural studies systematically rejected high/low culture distinctions and took seriously the artifacts of media culture, thus surpassing the elitism of dominant literary approaches to culture. Likewise, British cultural studies overcame the limitations of the Frankfurt School notion of a passive audience in their conceptions of an active audience that creates meanings and the popular. Building on semiotic conceptions developed by Umberto Eco, Stuart Hall argued that a distinction must be made between the encoding of media texts by producers and the decoding by consumers (1980b). This distinction highlighted the ability of audiences to produce their own readings and meanings, to decode texts in aberrant or oppositional ways, as well as the "preferred" ways in tune with the dominant ideology.

Despite their differences, like the Frankfurt school, the work of the Birmingham school of cultural studies is transdisciplinary in terms of their metatheory and practice. It thus subverts existing academic boundaries by combining social theory, cultural analysis and critique, and politics in a project aimed at a comprehensive criticism of the present configuration of culture and society. Moreover, it attempts to link theory and practice in a project that is oriented toward fundamental social transformation. Situating culture within a theory of social production and reproduction, British cultural studies specifies the ways that cultural forms served either to further social domination, or to enable people to resist and struggle against domination. It analyzes society as a hierarchical and antagonistic set of social relations characterized by the oppression of subordinate class, gender, race, ethnic, and national strata. Employing Gramsci's model of hegemony and counterhegemony (1971 and 1992), British cultural studies sought to analyze "hegemonic," or ruling, social and cultural forces of domination and to seek "counterhegemonic" forces of resistance and struggle.

For Gramsci, societies maintained their stability through a combination of force and hegemony, with some institutions and groups violently exerting power to maintain social boundaries (i.e. the police, military, vigilante groups, etc.), while other institutions (like religion, schooling, or the media) serve to induce consent to the dominant order through the establishing the hegemony, or ideological dominance, of a distinctive type of social order (i.e. liberal capitalism, fascism, white supremacy, democratic socialism, communism, and so on). Hegemony theory thus involved both analysis of current forces of domination and the ways that distinctive political forces achieved hegemonic power (i.e. Thatcherism or Reaganism) and the delineation of counterhegemonic forces, groups, and ideas that could contest and overthrow the existing hegemony. Hegemony theory thus requires historically specific socio-cultural analysis of particular conjunctures and forces, with cultural studies highlighting how culture serves broader social and political ends.

British cultural studies aimed at a political project of social transformation in which location of forces of domination and resistance would aid the process of political struggle. Richard Johnson, in discussions at a 1990 University of Texas conference on cultural studies, stressed that a distinction should be made between the postmodern concept of difference and the Birmingham notion of antagonism, in which the first concept often refers to a liberal conception of recognizing and tolerating differences, while the notion of antagonism refers to structural forces of domination, in which asymmetrical relations of power exist in sites of conflict. Within

relations of antagonism, oppressed individuals struggle to surmount structures of domination in a variety of arenas. Johnson stressed that the Birmingham approach always defined itself as materialist, analyzing socio-historical conditions and structures of domination and resistance. In this way, it could be distinguished from idealist, textualist, and extreme discourse theories which only recognized linguistic forms as constitutive of culture and subjectivity.

Moreover, British cultural studies developed an approach that avoided cutting up the field of culture into high and low, popular vs. elite, and to see all forms of culture as worthy of scrutiny and criticism. It advocated approaches to culture that appraised the politics of culture and made political discriminations between different types of culture and their varying political effects. Bringing the study of race, gender, and class into the center of the study of culture and communications, the Birmingham Centre adopted a critical approach that interpreted culture within society and situated the study of culture within the field of contemporary social theory and oppositional politics.

From the beginning, the Birmingham project was oriented toward the crucial political problems of their age and milieu. Their early spotlight on class and ideology derived from an acute sense of the oppressive and systemic effects of class in British society and the struggles of the 1960s against class inequality and oppression. The work of the late 1950s and early 1960s Williams/Hoggart/Hall stage of cultural studies valorized the potential of working class cultures and then began in the 1960s and 1970s appraising the potential of youth subcultures to resist the hegemonic forms of capitalist domination. Unlike the classical Frankfurt school (but similar to Herbert Marcuse), British cultural studies looked to youth cultures as providing potentially new forms of opposition and social change. Through studies of youth subcultures, British cultural studies demonstrated how culture came to constitute distinct forms of identity and group membership and appraised the oppositional potential of various youth subcultures (see Jefferson 1976 and Hebdige 1979).

Cultural studies came to center attention on how subcultural groups resist dominant forms of culture and identity, creating their own style and identities. Individuals who conform to hegemonic dress and fashion codes, behavior, and political ideologies thus produce their identities within mainstream groups, as members of particular social groupings (such as white, middle-class conservative Americans). Individuals who identify with subcultures, like punk culture, or hip hop subcultures, look and act differently from those in the mainstream, and thus create oppositional identities, defining themselves against standard models.

British cultural studies was thus engaged in a sustained quest for political agency and new political subjects and movements when they discerned that the working class was integrated into existing capitalist societies. Their studies were highly political in nature and stressed the potentials for resistance in oppositional subcultures. The development of cultural studies and search for new political agents were influenced by 1960s struggles and political movements. The move toward feminism, often conflictual, was shaped by the feminist movement, while the turn toward race as a significant factor of study was fuelled by the anti-racist struggles of the day. The focus in British cultural studies on education was related to political concern with the role of schooling in the continuing bourgeois hegemony despite the struggles of the 1960s -- as well as return to a pedagogical concern that was at the origins of the work of the Birmingham group. The

right turn in British politics with Thatcher's victory led in the late 1970's to concern with understanding the authoritarian populism of the new conservative hegemony.

As it developed into the 1970s and 1980s, British cultural studies successively appropriated feminism, race theory, gay and lesbian theory, postmodern theory, and other fashionable theoretical modes. They deployed these theoretical perspectives to examine the ways that the established society and culture promoted sexism, racism, homophobia, and other forms of oppression, -- or helped to generate resistance and struggle against these phenomena. This approach implicitly contained political critique of all cultural forms that promoted oppression and domination, while positively valorizing texts and representations that produced a potentially more just and egalitarian social order.

Developments within classical British cultural studies have thus been in part responses to struggles by a multiplicity of different groups which have produced new methods and voices within cultural studies (such as a variety of new feminisms, gay and lesbian studies, insurgent multiculturalism, critical pedagogy, and critical media literacy). Thus, the center and fulcrum of British cultural studies at any given moment was determined by the struggles in the present political conjuncture and their major work was thus conceived as political interventions. Their studies of ideology, domination and resistance, and the politics of culture directed the Birmingham group toward analyzing cultural artifacts, practices, and institutions within existing networks of power; in this context, they attempted to show how culture both provided tools and forces of domination and resources for resistance and struggle. This political optic valorized studying the effects of culture and audience use of cultural artifacts, which provided an extremely productive focus on audiences and reception, topics that had been neglected in most previous text-based approaches to culture. Yet recent developments in the field of cultural studies have arguably vitiated and depoliticized the project.

Cultural Populism and the Politics of the Popular

In the 1980s, there was a turn within British cultural studies and beyond to celebrations of the popular, the pleasures of consumption, and affirmations of a postmodern global culture of multiplicity and difference which led many in the tradition to uncritical celebration of "popular culture" and the joys of consumption. However, just as the term "mass culture" is ideologically loaded and overly derogatory, so too is the term "popular culture" overly positive (see the analysis in Kellner 1995). In its usage by John Fiske (1989a and 1989b) and other contemporary practitioners of cultural studies, the terms "popular culture" and "the popular" suggest that the people themselves choose and construct the popular, covering over that it media culture a top-down form of culture produced by culture industries in a market governed by commercial and ideological imperatives. The discourse of the "popular" has long been utilized in Latin America and elsewhere to describe culture fabricated by and for the people themselves as an adversarial sphere to mainstream or hegemonic culture. Thus, in many oppositional discourses, "popular forces" describe groups struggling against domination and oppression, while "popular culture" describes culture of, by, and for the people, in which they create and participate in cultural practices that articulate their experience and aspirations.

The concept of "popular culture" also encodes a celebratory aura associated with the Popular

Culture Association, which often engages in uncritical affirmations of all that is "popular." Since this term is associated in the U.S. with individuals and groups who often eschew critical, theoretically informed, and political approaches to culture, it is risky to use this term, though Fiske has tried to provide the term "popular culture" with an inflection consistent with the socially critical approach of cultural studies. Fiske defines the "popular" as that which audiences make of and do with the commodities of the culture industries (1989a and 1989b). He argues that progressives should appropriate the term "popular," wresting it from conservatives and liberals, using it as part of an arsenal of concepts in a cultural politics of opposition and resistance (discussion in Austin, September 1990). Fiske claims "there can be no instance of the popular which involves domination," thus excluding the "popular" from domination and manipulation in principle.

More debate is needed as to whether using the term "popular culture" in any form risks blunting the critical edge of cultural studies, and whether it is thus simply better to avoid terms like "mass culture" and "popular culture." A possible move within cultural studies would therefore be to take culture itself as the field of one's studies without divisions into the high and the low, the popular and the elite -- though, of course, these distinctions can be strategically deployed in certain contexts. Thus, I believe that instead of using ideological labels like "mass" and "popular culture," it is preferable to talk of "media culture" when considering the forms of radio, television, film, journalism, music, advertising, and the other modes of culture generated by communications media; further, I would propose developing a cultural studies cutting across the full expanse of culture from radio to opera, rather than bifurcating the field and only focusing on "popular" forms (Kellner 1995).

Moreover, especially as it has developed in the United States, many current configurations of cultural studies are too narrow in their optic, either by concentrating solely on cultural texts and/or audience reception, thus occluding the broader terrain of culture and society. In his study of Madonna, for instance, Fiske writes: "A cultural analysis, then, will reveal both the way the dominant ideology is structured into the text and into the reading subject, and those textual features that enable negotiated, resisting, or oppositional readings to be made. Cultural analysis reaches a satisfactory conclusion when the ethnographic studies of the historically and socially located meanings that are made are related to the semiotic analysis of the text" (1989a: 98). This dialectic of text/audience, however, leaves out many mediations that should be part of cultural studies and a sociology of culture, including analyses of how texts are manufactured within the context of the political economy and system of production of culture, as well as how audiences are formed by a variety of social institutions, practices, ideologies, and the uses of different media.

Thus, centering on texts and audiences to the exclusion of analysis of the social relations and institutions in which texts are created and consumed truncates cultural studies, as does analysis of reception that fails to indicate how audiences are produced through their social relations and how to some extent a distinctive culture and society help shape audiences and their reception of texts. Fiske's claim, for instance, that a cultural studies analysis of Madonna merely needs to analyze her texts and the ways that her audiences uses the material overlooks the social construction of "Madonna," her audiences, and the ways that her marketing strategies, use of new media technologies, and skillful exploitation of themes resonant within her socio-historical

moment all account for important dimensions of the "Madonna phenomenon."

Madonna first emerged in the moment of Reaganism and embodied the materialistic and consumer-oriented ethos of the 1980s ("Material Girl"). She also appeared at a time of dramatic image proliferation, associated with MTV, fashion fever, and intense marketing and promotion. Madonna was one of the first MTV music video superstars who consciously crafted images to attract a mass audience. She used top production personnel to create her videos and music and brilliant marketing strategies to incorporate ever larger and diverse audiences. Her early music videos were aimed at teen-age girls (the Madonna wanna-bes), but she soon incorporated black, Hispanic, and minority audiences with her images of interracial sex and a multicultural "family" in her concerts. She also appealed to gay and lesbian audiences, as well as feminist and academic audiences, as her videos became more complex and political (i.e. "Like a Prayer," "Express Yourself," "Vogue," and so on).

Madonna also had at her disposal one of the top PR firms in the business and probably no one has gotten more publicity and been more in the public eye. Thus, Madonna's popularity was in large part a function of her marketing and promotion strategies, combined with creative fabrication of music videos and images that appealed to diverse audiences. The latter was a function of new technologies of music video and the ascendancy of MTV and a culture of the spectacle which she skillfully exploited. The meanings and effects of her artifacts therefore can best be discerned within the context of their production and reception, which involves discussion of MTV, the music industry, concerts, marketing, and the construction of images and spectacle. Understanding Madonna's popularity also requires study of audiences, not just as individuals, but as members of distinctive groups, such as teen-age girls, who were encouraged in their struggles for individual identity by Madonna, or gays, who were empowered by her incorporation of alternative images of sexuality within popular mainstream cultural artifacts. Yet appraising the politics and effects of Madonna also requires analysis of how her work might merely reproduce a consumer culture that defines identity in terms of images and consumption (see Kellner 1995, Chapter 7).

Fetishism of the Audience and Resistance

Indeed, in many versions of contemporary cultural studies, concentration on the audience and reception is too restrictive. Hence, there is the danger of the fetishism of the audience in the recent emphasis on the importance of reception and generation of meanings. On the whole, there has been a large-scale shift during the past decade within cultural studies from concentrating on texts and the context of their production to centering attention on the audience and reception, in some cases producing a new dogmatism whereby the audience, or reader, alone creates meaning. The texts, society, and system of production and reception disappear in the solipsistic ecstasy of the textual producer, in which there is no text outside of reading -- resulting in a parody of Derrida's bon mot that there is nothing outside of the text.

Furthermore, there has been a fetishism of resistance in some versions of cultural studies. There is a tendency within the cultural studies tradition of reception research to dichotomize between dominant and oppositional readings. Hall's distinctions between "dominant," "negotiated," and "oppositional" readings (1980b) is flattened in Fiske's work to a dichotomy between the

dominant and the oppositional. "Dominant" readings are those in which audiences appropriate texts in line with the interests of the hegemonic culture and the ideological intentions of a text, as when audiences feel pleasure in the restoration of male power, law and order, and social stability at the end of a film like *Die Hard*, after the hero and representatives of authority eliminate the terrorists who had taken over a high-rise corporate headquarters. An "oppositional" reading, by contrast, celebrates the resistance to this reading in audience appropriation of a text; for example, Fiske (1993) observes resistance to dominant readings when homeless individuals in a shelter cheered the destruction of police and authority figures, during repeated viewings of a video-tape of the film, before the Superhero re-establishes law and order -- at which time, Fiske claims, the homeless men lost interest in the video.

There is, however, a tendency in cultural studies to celebrate resistance per se without distinguishing between types and forms of resistance (a similar problem resides with indiscriminate celebration of audience pleasure in certain reception studies). Thus resistance to social authority by the homeless evidenced in their viewing of *Die Hard* could serve to strengthen brutal masculist behavior and encourage manifestations of physical violence to solve social problems. Violence, as Sartre, Fanon, and Marcuse, among others, have argued, can be either emancipatory, directed at forces of oppression, or reactionary, directed at popular forces struggling against oppression. Many feminists, by contrast, see all violence as forms of brute masculist behavior and many people involved in peace studies see it as a problematic form of conflict resolution. Moreover, unqualified valorization of audience resistance to preferred meanings as good per se can lead to populist celebrations of the text and audience pleasure in its use of cultural artifacts. This approach, taken to an extreme, would lose its critical perspective and would lead to a populist positive gloss on audience experience of whatever is being studied. Such studies also might lose sight of the manipulative and conservative effects of certain types of mass-mediated culture and thus serve the interests of the culture industries as they are presently constituted.

While concentrating on the audience and reception was an important correction to the limitations of purely textual analysis, I believe that in recent years cultural studies has overemphasized reception and textual analysis, while decentering the production of culture and its political economy. While earlier, the Birmingham group regularly focused on media institutions and practices, and the relations between media culture and broader social structures and ideologies, this theme has waned in recent years, to the detriment of much current work in cultural studies. For instance, in his classical programmatic article, "Encoding/ Decoding," Stuart Hall began his analysis by using Marx's *Grundrisse* as a model to trace the articulations of "a continuous circuit," encompassing "production - distribution - production" (1980b: 128ff.). He concretizes this model through analysis of how media institutions produce messages, how they circulate, and how audiences use or decode the messages to create meaning.

Similarly, Richard Johnson provides a model of cultural studies, analogous to Hall's earlier model, based on a diagram of the circuits of production, textuality, and reception, similar to the circuits of capital stressed by Marx (see 1985/1986: 47). Although Johnson stresses the importance of analysis of production in cultural studies and criticizes the British film journal *Screen* for abandoning the perspective of production in favor of more idealist and textualist approaches (63ff.), much work in cultural studies has replicated this omission. One could indeed

argue that most recent cultural studies have tended to disregard analyses of the circuits of political economy and production in favor of text and audience-based analyses.

Indeed, the fetishism of the popular in contemporary cultural studies overlooks the role of marketing and public relations strategies in helping to produce the popular. The "popular" is not just created by audiences alone as Fiske would have it, but is negotiated between audiences and cultural producers with the mediation of cultural industry hype, public relations, and media discourses. In other words, part of the popular is produced by advertising, public relations, critics' accolades or generating of controversies, and general media exchange which tells audiences that they must see this film, watch this television show, listen to this music, be familiar with this celebrity to be with it, to be in the know. I addressed the role of marketing strategies, public relations, critical hype, and media discourses in producing the Madonna phenomenon above, and would argue that other megastars like Michael Jackson, Mariah Carey, and popular film stars also benefit from megapublicity machines.

In addition, films like the Star Wars series are hyped in massive advertising campaigns, cross-over promotions with products like Pepsi and Coke, or food chains like McDonald's and Burger King, as well as articulations with toys and other consumer products. The second Austin Powers film was the beneficiary of unprecedented advertising hype in summer 1999 (including appearance in a Madonna music video) which helped produce an opening weekend gross superior to the entire take of the previous Austin Powers film, as well as surpassing Star Wars: Phantom Empire as the highest grossing film of the week -- before disappearing after its 15 minutes of fame (or 15 days of high gross in this case). Advertising budgets for high-concept films are often a significant part of the film's expenses and elaborate promotional campaigns are an essential aspect of the effort to increase an artifact's popularity (this is also true in the music, television, video game, and computer industries).

While many affiliated with British cultural studies in recent years have ignored production, some in the tradition and others outside of it have made important advances by analyzing the products and institutions of corporate culture with studies of Sony Walkman (Hall et al 19xx), McDonald's (see Ritzer 1993/6, Alfino et al 1998, and Smart 1999), Barbie dolls (Rogers 199x), and Nike (Goldman and Papsion 1999), as well as malls, theme parks, and new sites of consumption (see Gottdiener 1997 and Ritzer 1999). Practitioners of media culture studies should likewise concentrate more analysis on media corporations, practices, and promotion campaigns to better grasp the ways that media culture is produced, circulated, and distributed.

Analyzing the marketing and production of stardom and popularity thus demonstrates how the popular is a negotiated interaction between the culture industries and audiences. Obviously, for celebrities or products to be popular they must resonate with audience experiences and fantasies, but the culture industries pay people incredible amounts of money to research precisely what will sell and then aggressively market this product. Breaking with a fetish of the popular can help reveal how the popular is a construct and could also help to demystify the arguably false idols of media culture and to produce more critical audience perception. Analyzing the business dimension of media culture can thus help produce critical consciousness as well as better understanding of its production and distribution. Such a dimension enhances cultural studies and contributes to developing a critical media pedagogy that supplements analysis of how to read

media texts and how to study audience use of them.

The fetishism of the popular also leads dominant trends in British and North American cultural studies to slighting high culture and the engagement of modernist and avant garde movements, such as distinguished the work of the Frankfurt School whose analyses extended from the most esoteric modernist art to the most banal artifacts of media culture. It appears that in its anxiety to legitimate study of the popular and to engage the artifacts of media culture, cultural studies has turned away from so-called high or elite culture in favor of the popular. But such a turn sacrifices the possible insights into all forms of culture and replicates the bifurcation of the field of culture into a "popular" and "elite" (which merely inverts the positive/negative valorizations of the older high/low distinction). More important, it disconnects cultural studies from attempts to develop oppositional forms of culture of the sort associated with the "historical avant-garde" (Burger 1984). Avant-garde movements like Expressionism, Surrealism, and Dada wanted to develop art that would revolutionize society, that would provide alternatives to hegemonic forms of culture (see Bronner and Kellner 1983).

The oppositional and emancipatory potential of avant garde art movements was a primary emphasis of the Frankfurt School, especially Adorno, and it is unfortunate that British and North American cultural studies have largely neglected engaging avant-garde art forms and movements. This is connected with a failure of many versions of cultural studies and the sociology of culture to develop a radical cultural and media politics, such as is found in the works of Brecht and Walter Benjamin, concerned with cultural politics and the development of alternative oppositional cultures. The ignoring of modernist and avant-garde art and intense focus on the popular was aided and abetted by the postmodern turn in cultural studies which disseminated key positions and strategies of British cultural studies throughout the world but also helped produce an important mutation in the cultural studies project.

The Postmodern Turn in Cultural Studies

Although cultural populism, the turn to the audience, and fetishism of the popular can be read as part of a postmodern turn in cultural studies, a more explicit version is found in the work of critical critics who wish to revise the project of cultural studies from the perspectives of postmodern theory advanced by Jean Baudrillard (1983a, 1983b, and 1993), Fredric Jameson (1991 and 1998), and others. One version involves an appropriation of the collapse of high into low culture, of depth onto surface, and the audience into the text, such that distinctions within media culture and between texts, audiences, and contexts are increasingly difficult to make; in its more extreme versions, the postmodern turn in cultural studies excludes the very possibility of progressive or critical encoding or decoding of cultural texts, or of significant cultural opposition and resistance.

While Jameson has developed his own Marxian version of cultural studies that has been immensely influential (see Jameson 1978 and 1991 and the discussions of his work in Kellner 1989c), his ground-breaking essays on postmodernism claim that postmodern culture manifests "the emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense -- perhaps the supreme formal feature of all the postmodernisms" (1991: 9). Existentially, Jameson identifies the "waning of affect" within fragmented postmodern selves

devoid of the expressive energies characteristic of modernism. Such one-dimensional postmodern texts and selves put in question the continued relevance of hermeneutic depth models such as the Marxian model of essence and appearance, true and false consciousness; the Freudian model of latent and manifest meanings; the existentialist model of authentic and inauthentic existence; and the semiotic model of signifier and signified.

For Arthur Kroker and David Cook (1986: 267ff), following Baudrillard, television is just a sign-machine that spews out image after image whose meanings cancel each other out in a postmodern implosion of noise -- a black hole of meaninglessness, imploding into the masses who themselves cancel out and resist meaning, losing themselves in the mediascapes of simulation. In an article on television and postmodernity (1997b [1987]), Lawrence Grossberg in turn characterizes "the in-difference of television," which reduces the flow of TV images to mere affect and feeling, disconnected and fragmented signs akin to billboards that drivers glance at as they speed down superhighways. Several articles in a collection of television criticism, *Watching Television* (Gitlin 1986) aggressively take this position which builds on McLuhan's theory of "medium as message," Baudrillard's theory of the media, and Jameson's arguments concerning the depthlessness and waning of affect in postmodern culture. Pat Aufderheide, for example, thinks that music videos abolish "the kinds of energizing, critical response once called up by rock music" (1986: 112). With Todd Gitlin and other contributors to the volume, she pursues a formalist analysis which sees television less as a transmission of ideological messages, than a total look or environment. Music videos, with their fantasy structures, rapid, mesmerizing cuts and camera angles, throbbing music soundtracks, and extreme aestheticized environments, offer a total mood or pure environment to be consumed.

A certain version of postmodern cultural criticism thus signifies the death of hermeneutics: in place of what Ricoeur (1970) has termed a "hermeneutics of suspicion" and the polysemic reading of cultural symbols and texts rises a postmodern view that there is nothing behind the surface of texts, no depth or multiplicity of meanings for critical inquiry to discover and explicate. Postmodern cultural criticism thus renounces hermeneutics and tends to privilege the medium over the message, style over substance, and form over content. For postmodern theorists like Baudrillard, as for McLuhan, "the medium is the message" and the rise to cultural dominance of media culture is symptomatic of far-reaching social and cultural changes.

Yet many other types of postmodern cultural theory and politics have emerged. Hal Foster (1983) distinguishes between a conservative postmodernism of quotation of past forms and a postmodernism of resistance, championing art works that engage in social criticism and subversion. Indeed, many feminists, people of color, gays and lesbians, multiculturalists, postcolonialists and others have deployed a postmodern cultural studies to stress difference and marginality, valorizing the culture and practices of individuals and groups excluded from mainstream culture, generating a cultural studies of the margins and oppositional voices. Nestor Garcia Canclini (1995), for instance, describes the "hybrid cultures" and "oblique powers" of forms of popular art in Latin America, including monuments, graffiti, comic books, and songs.

Another version of the postmodern turn in cultural studies involves reconstructing the project of cultural studies in response to the challenges of postmodern theory. Lawrence Grossberg, for instance, has been carrying out a systematic attempt to rethink the project of British cultural

studies in response to what he perceived as the new postmodern condition. Having been one of the organizers of the University of Illinois at Urbana conference on Marxism and Postmodernism in 1983, Grossberg heard Jameson's presentation of postmodernism and the response of Hall and others associated with British cultural studies. In a 1986 article, "History, Politics, Postmodernism," Grossberg is justifiably skeptical about postmodern claims for a radical break in culture or history, arguing: "I think it unlikely (and certainly too easy a conclusion), but its powerful presence and popularity do suggest a series of questions that must be addressed about the possibilities of communication, opposition, elitism, and self-definition" (1997a: 188).

Noting that British cultural studies "has been shaped by an almost continuous series of debates and challenges" (1997a: 187), Grossberg notes that it is now time for cultural studies to enter the fray in the disputes about the postmodern and to respond accordingly. Grossberg notes that both cultural studies and postmodern theory are anti-essentialist and radically contextualist, and that both reject an extreme deconstructionist rejection of all fixed positions and meanings. Both are concerned "less with questions of origin and causality than with questions of effectivity, conditions of possibility, and overdetermination" (189). Both are concerned with power, domination, and resistance, and both can be articulated with radical politics and new social movements, so the possibility of an articulation between postmodern theory and cultural studies is readily apparent.

Grossberg is aware that certain Baudrillardian and extreme versions of cultural studies resist such articulation and in a series of articles argues against what he sees as elitism, excessive pessimism and nihilism, and political deficits within some versions of postmodern theory, calling for development of a more positive postmodernism (1997a and 1997b) -- a position shared by Dick Hebdige, Angela McRobbie (1994), Ien Ang (1996), Stuart Hall, and others associated with British cultural studies. In Hall's words (1991):

the global postmodern signifies an ambiguous opening to difference and to the margins and makes a certain kind of decentering of the Western narrative a likely possibility; it is matched, from the very heartland of cultural politics, by the backlash: the aggressive resistance to difference; the attempt to restore the canon of Western civilization; the assault, direct and indirect, on multiculturalism; the return to grand narratives of history, language, and literature (the three great supporting pillars of national identity and national culture); the defense of ethnic absolutism, of a cultural racism that has marked the Thatcher and the Reagan eras; and the new xenophobias that are about to overwhelm fortress Europe.

For Hall, therefore, the global postmodern involves a pluralizing of culture, openings to the margins, to difference, to voices excluded from the narratives of Western culture. Moreover, one could argue that a postmodernist cultural studies articulates experiences and phenomena within a new mode of social organization. The emphasis on active audiences, resistant readings, oppositional texts, utopian moments, and the like describes an era in which individuals are trained to be more active media consumers, and in which they are given a much wider choice of cultural materials, corresponding to a new global and transnational capitalism with a much broader array of consumer choices, products, and services. In this regime, difference sells, and the dissimilarities, multiplicities, and heterogeneity valorized in postmodern theory describes the proliferation of otherness and marginality in a new social order predicated on proliferation of

consumer desires and needs.

The postmodern turn has also produced tendencies toward textualism and theoreticism, in which everything becomes a text and the practice of cultural studies becomes using theory to providing reading of texts. In the most egregious examples of theoreticism, jargon replaces analysis, context disappears, and cultural studies degenerates into academic wordplay. Thus, whereas theory can provide tools of analysis and critique, it can also be abused and misused.

Thus, there are competing versions of the postmodern turn in cultural studies. At its most extreme, the postmodern turn erases economic, political, and social dimensions to cultural production and reception, carries out a new form of cultural and technological determinism, engages in theoreticist blather, and renounces the possibility of textual interpretation, social criticism, and political struggle. In a more dialectical and political version, postmodern theory is used to rethink cultural criticism and politics in the contemporary era. Indeed, postmodern theory can be useful in calling attention to new configurations and functions of culture, as it charts the trajectories and impacts of new technologies, the emergent global economy and culture, and the novel political terrain and movements. In addition, some versions of postmodern theory provide extremely useful interdisciplinary perspectives, as did the Frankfurt School and British cultural studies at their best.

Cultural Studies Under Siege

During the 1990s, cultural studies became a target of intense contestation and debate, taken up by individuals in a myriad of disciplines, attacked by more traditionalist defenders of the disciplines, and often assaulted from the left and right alike. A 1993 ICA (International Communications Association) panel elicited a passionate response with debates between defenders and critics of the current configuration of British cultural studies and the organizers of the panel, Marjorie Ferguson and Peter Golding, collected papers from the contributors to the panel and others into a book *Cultural Studies in Question* (1997). Citing a "deep unease" with its current configuration, the editors claim that cultural studies is today a crucial subject of controversy due to its high visibility which makes it impossible to ignore, and its "infinite plasticity" which enables the field to absorb any conceivable topic from its own internal history to "history and global culture in a postmodern age" (Grossberg et al., 1992: 18-22, cited in Ferguson and Golding 1997: xiii). And most crucially -- in the light of its extravagant claims -- the editors warn that we must be aware of its "failure to deal empirically with the deep structural changes in national and global political, economic and media systems through its eschewing of economic, social or policy analysis" (ibid). In this situation: "As ontology replaces epistemology and interpretation replaces investigation, the embrace of textualism, discursive strategies, representation and polysemic meanings accelerates the elevation of the theoretical over the empirical and the abstract over the concrete" (1997: xiv)

Within the volume itself, Todd Gitlin (1997: 25ff) polemicizes against what he sees as a retreat from politics in cultural studies. Against the more ludic, celebratory, and theoretical modes of cultural studies, Angela McRobbie (1997: 170ff) urges a return to the "three Es": the empirical, the experiential, and the ethnographic, calling in effect for a more grounded sociological analysis. Likewise, David Morley criticizes some of the dominant varieties of contemporary

cultural studies and argues for "putting sociology back in" (1997: 121ff). The editors and other contributors bemoan the distancing of cultural studies from political economy and argue for articulating cultural studies with political economy and a social science approach to the study of culture (Ferguson and Golding 1997; Garnham 1997; Murdock 1997; Kellner 1997a; and Thomas 1997).

In addition, I would argue that critical social theory is necessary to adequately develop cultural studies. Earlier models in the Frankfurt School and British cultural studies made the relationship between culture and society the center of their analysis, utilizing the methods of social theory and more literary and cultural analysis to contextualize the production, distribution and consumption of culture and to critically analyze cultural texts. As British cultural studies developed, it brought more and more theories into its purview, but as its project became globalized and absorbed into a multiplicity of disciplines the connection with social theory has often been attenuated. In some of the ludic, postmodern forms of cultural studies, context, text, and the constraints of everyday life disappear in descriptions of the ludic pleasures of consumers or the surfaces of texts. Thus, the relationship between cultural studies and social theory is itself complex, shifting, and variable.

In this context, I would propose that cultural studies utilize critical social theory to develop a multiperspectivist approach which includes investigation of a broad expanse of artifacts, interrogating relationships within the three dimensions of: 1) the production and political economy of culture; 2) textual analysis and critique of its artifacts; and 3) study of audience reception and the uses of media/cultural products. This proposal involves suggesting, first, that cultural studies itself be multiperspectivist, getting at culture from the optics of political economy and production, text analysis, and audience reception. I would also propose that textual analysis and audience reception studies utilize a multiplicity of perspectives, or critical methods, when engaging in textual analysis, and in delineating the multiplicity or subject positions, or perspectives, through which audiences appropriate culture. Moreover, the results of such studies need to be interpreted and contextualized within critical social theory to adequately delineate their meanings and effects.

One can obviously not deploy the full range of methods and perspectives noted above in each distinctive project that one undertakes and the nature of particular projects will determine what perspectives are most productive. But one should nonetheless see the dimensions of political economy, textual analysis, and audience research as complementing each other rather than as constituting separate domains. I am not, therefore, making the impossible suggestion that one adopt this comprehensive multiperspectivist approach every time that one sets out to do cultural studies or a piece of sociological cultural research. Obviously, intensely focusing on political economy, on audience reception, or on close textual reading and criticism, alone can be very valuable and yield important insights. But exclusively and constantly highlighting one of these dimensions to the omitting of others can be destructive for a sociology of culture or cultural studies that aims at developing comprehensive and inclusive approaches to culture and society, which interrogates culture in all of its dimensions.

A critical cultural studies would also pursue certain pedagogical, ethical, and political ends. While the early development of British cultural studies was closely connected to adult education

and pedagogy, later cultural studies became more academic and disciplinary. In recent years, however, there has been a call to return cultural studies to articulation with a critical pedagogy, a project that I endorse (see Giroux 1994; Grossberg 1997b; and Kellner 1995). Since media culture itself is a potent form of pedagogy, cultural studies should develop a counterpedagogy that teaches audience how to read cultural texts, how to critically decode and produce oppositional readings, and to understand the effectivity of cultural texts in socialization, the construction of identity, and the reproduction of social relations.

I would also argue that critical pedagogy involves what Paulo Freire (1973 and 1998) calls reading the world through reading the text, so that gaining critical literacy, the ability to read the word, involves at the same time learning to read the world through the word and text. This injunction is parallel to a basic tenet of critical cultural studies that operates with a dialectic of text and context, situating and reading texts through their social contexts and better understanding context through critical reading of texts. From this perspective, gaining critical media literacy involves learning to read texts through the world and the world through texts. Hence, just as politics is a form of pedagogy, a critical pedagogy is a form of politics, teaching individuals how to situate their forms of culture and their everyday lives in the context of the social and political system in which they live.

Developing critical media literacy also requires development of a postmodern pedagogy that takes seriously image, spectacle, and narrative, and thus promotes visual and media literacy, the ability to read and analyze critically images, stories, and spectacles of media culture. Yet a postmodern pedagogy is concerned to develop multiple literacies, to rethink literacy itself in relation to new technologies and new cultural forms, and to develop a cultural studies that encompasses a wide array of fields, texts, and practices, extending from popular music to poetry and painting to cyberspace and multimedia like CD-ROMs (see Kellner 1998 and Hammer and Kellner 1999).

The particular pedagogy employed, however, should be contextual, depending on the concrete situation, interests, and problems within the specific site in which cultural studies is taught or carried out. For it will be the distinctive interests of the teachers, students, or critic that will help determine what precise artifacts are engaged, what methods will be used, and what pedagogy will be deployed. Just as a cultural studies research problem and text is necessarily contextual, so too must be its pedagogy and its politics.

A critical pedagogy also dissects the norms, values, role models, and negative and positive representations in cultural artifacts. Rather than focusing on ethics per se, British cultural studies and its later variants tend to engage the politics of representation. Employing Gramsci's model of hegemony and counterhegemony, cultural studies attempts to specify forces of domination and resistance in order to aid the process of political struggle and emancipation from oppression and domination. Their politics of representation thus entailed a critique of cultural representations that promoted racism, sexism, classism, or any forms of oppression. Representations that promoted domination and oppression were thus negatively valorized, while those that promoted egalitarianism, social justice, and emancipation were positively valorized.

In this optic, ethics tends to be subordinated to politics and the moral dimension of culture tends

to be underemphasized or downplayed. Thus, one could argue for a cultural studies that more explicitly stresses the importance of ethical analysis, scrutinizing cultural texts for the distinctive ethical norms, ideals, and values portrayed and evaluating the work accordingly. Or one could explore in more detail and depth than is usually done in cultural studies the moral and philosophical dimensions of cultural texts, the ways that they carry out moral critiques of society and culture, or embody ethical concerns regarding good and evil, and construct models of moral and immoral behavior or phenomena.

Yet ethical concerns permeated cultural studies from the beginning (see Hoggart 1957 and Williams 1958). Culture is, among other things, a major transmitter and generator of values and a cultural studies sensitive to the very nature and function of culture should be aware of its ethical dimension. Thus, concern with ethics, with the moral aspects of cultural texts, should be a central and fundamental consideration of cultural studies, as it was with non-formalist literary studies. While it is unlikely that the texts of media culture have the ethical depth and complexity of great literary texts, it is clear that ethical concerns are of fundamental importance to the sort of popular cultural artifacts that have been the domain of cultural studies (for proposals for developing the themes of ethics, aesthetics, and conceptions of distinction and taste in cultural studies, see Mepham 1991; Tester 1994; McGuigan 1997a; and Stevenson 1997).

But cultural studies has also sought to articulate the thematics and effects of its artifacts with existing political struggles. There have been indeed a significant number of attempts to connect cultural studies with oppositional political movements and, more recently, with more pragmatic involvement in policy issues and debates (see McGuigan 1996 and Bennett 1992 and 1997). There are thus a heterogeneity of political articulations of cultural studies and, as with its pedagogy, its politics will necessarily be conjunctural and contextual, depending on the particular site and moment of a certain form of cultural studies.

Such a transdisciplinary and political project involves a synthesis of the Frankfurt school, British cultural studies, postmodern theory, and other critical approaches, combining empirical research, theory, critique, and practice. A revitalized cultural studies would reject the distinction between high and low culture and would study a broad expanse of cultural artifacts. It would use the concept of an active audience and valorize resistance, but also explore manipulation and more passive reception. A political cultural studies would follow earlier trends of British cultural studies with detailed consideration of oppositional subcultures and alternatives to mainstream culture, but would also devise strategies of alternative media and an activist cultural politics. It would combine the Frankfurt School focus on political economy, on media manipulation, and on the ways that culture reproduces domination, with scrutiny of the emancipatory potential of a wide range of cultural artifacts extending from modernism and the avant garde to critical and subversive moments in media culture.

A critical sociology of culture and oppositional cultural studies would also draw upon feminist approaches and multicultural theories to fully analyze the functions of gender, class, race, ethnicity, nationality, sexual preference, and so on which are so important in constituting cultural texts and their effects, as well as fundamentally constitutive of audiences who appropriate and use texts. British cultural studies progressively adopted a feminist dimension (see McRobbie 1994 and 1997; and Gray 1997) paid greater attention to race, ethnicity, and nationality, and

concentrated on sexuality, as various discourse of race, gender, sex, nationality, and so on circulated in responses to social struggles and movements. Indeed, it is of crucial importance for a theoretically responsible cultural studies to continually appropriate the latest theoretical discourses and to modify its assumptions, program, and discourses in response to critiques of its previous work, the emergence of new theories that can be used to strengthen one's future work, and new social movements which produce new critical political discourses. Both the Frankfurt school and British cultural studies continually modified their work in response to novel theoretical and historical developments and in a period of rapid social-historical change and the proliferation of ever new theories, engagement with theory and history is of fundamental importance for all disciplines.

But a new cultural studies would also productively engage postmodern theory. We are currently living in a proliferating image culture in which new technologies are changing every dimension of life from the economy to personal identity. In a postmodern media and computer culture, fresh critical strategies are needed to read narratives, to interpret the conjunctions of sight and sound, words and images, that are producing novel cultural spaces, forms, and experiences. This project also involves exploration of the emergent cyberspaces and modes of identities, interaction, and production that is taking place in the rapidly exploding computer culture, as well as exploring the new public spaces where myriad forms of political debate and struggle are evolving (Kellner 1997c). Finally, a future-oriented sociology of culture should look closely at the development of the media and computer industries, the mergers and synergies taking place, and the syntheses of information and entertainment, computer and media culture, that are being planned and already implemented. A global media and cyberculture is our life world and fate and we need to be able to chart and map it accordingly to survive the dramatic changes currently taking place and the even more transformative novelties of the rapidly approaching future.

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