

**CHAPTER 2***Commodities and Culture***FORMATIONS OF THE PEOPLE**

Popular culture in industrial societies is contradictory to its core. On the one hand it is industrialized—its commodities produced and distributed by a profit-motivated industry that follows only its own economic interests. But on the other hand, it is of the people, and the people's interests are not those of the industry— as is evidenced by the number of films, records, and other products (of which the Edsel is only the most famous) that the people make into expensive failures. To be made into popular culture, a commodity must also bear the interests of the people. Popular culture is not consumption, it is culture— the active process of generating and circulating meanings and pleasures within a social system: culture, however industrialized, can never be adequately described in terms of the buying and selling of commodities.

Culture is a living, active process: it can be developed only from within, it cannot be imposed from without or above. The fears of the mass culture theorists have not been borne out in practice because mass culture is such a contradiction in terms that it cannot exist. A homogeneous, externally produced culture cannot be sold ready-made to the masses: culture simply does not work like that. Nor do the people behave or live like the masses, an aggregation of alienated, one-dimensional persons whose only consciousness is false, whose only relationship to the system that enslaves them is one of

unwitting (if not willing) dupes. Popular culture is made by the people, not produced by the culture industry. All the culture industries can do is produce a repertoire of texts or cultural resources for the various formations of the people to use or reject in the ongoing process of producing their popular culture.

"The people" is not a stable sociological category; it cannot be identified and subjected to empirical study, for it does not exist in objective reality. The people, the popular, the popular forces, are a shifting set of allegiances that cross all social categories; various individuals belong to different popular formations at different times, often moving between them quite fluidly. By "the people," then, I mean this shifting set of social allegiances, which are described better in terms of people's felt collectivity than in terms of external sociological factors such as class, gender, age, race, region, or what have you. Such allegiances may coincide with class and other social categories, but they don't necessarily: they can often cut across these categories, or often ignore them. So that while there clearly are interrelationships between the structure of the social system and cultural allegiances, they are not rigidly determinate ones at all.

The necessity of negotiating the problems of everyday life within a complex, highly elaborated social structure has produced nomadic subjectivities who can move around this grid, realigning their social allegiances into different formations of the people according to the necessities of the moment. All these reformulations are made within a structure of power relations, all social allegiances have not only a sense of *with whom*, but also of *against whom*: indeed, I would argue that the sense of oppositionality, the sense of difference, is more determinant than that of similarity, of class identity, for it is shared antagonisms that produce the fluidity that is characteristic of the people in elaborated societies.

The various formations of the people move as active agents, not subjugated subjects, across social categories, and are capable of adopting apparently contradictory positions either alternately or simultaneously without too much sense of strain. These popular allegiances are elusive, difficult to generalize and difficult to study, because they are made from within, they

are made by the people in specific contexts at specific times. They are context- and time-based, not structurally produced: they are a matter of practice, not of structure.

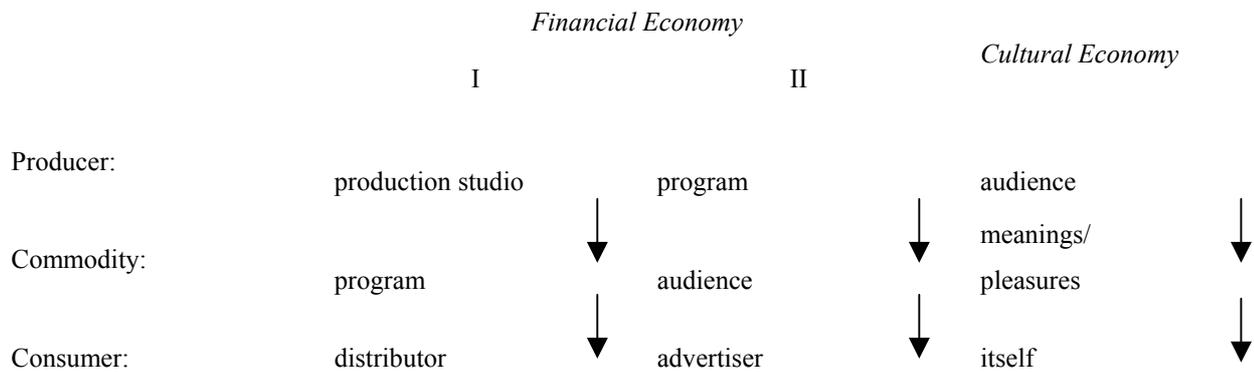
Young urban Aborigines in Australia watching old Westerns on Saturday-morning television ally themselves with the Indians, cheer them on as they attack the wagon train or homestead, killing the white men and carrying off the white women: they also identify with Arnold, the eternal black child in a white paternalist family in *Diff'rent Strokes*—constructing allegiances among American blackness, American Indianness, and Australian Aboriginality that enable them to make their sense out of their experience of being nonwhite in a white society (Hodge & Tripp, 1986). They evade the white, colonialist ideology of the Western to make their popular culture out of it, they evade the "white father will look after you" message of *Diff'rent Strokes* in order to find their meanings and their pleasures in Arnold's everyday practices of coping with it. But the dominant ideology has to be there: the pleasure produced by Arnold exists only because he is subject to (but not subjugated by) a white ideology whose paternalism is seen by them as antagonistic, not benevolent. So, too, the pleasure in the Indians' successes in the middle of the Western narrative is, in part, dependent on their inevitable defeat at the end. Popular culture has to be, above all else, *relevant* to the immediate social situation of the people. Aboriginal meanings and pleasures can be made only within and against white domination: without the textual reproduction of the power that is being struggled against, there can be no relevance.

A text that is to be made into popular culture must, then, contain both the forces of domination and the opportunities to speak against them, the opportunities to oppose or evade them from subordinated, but not totally disempowered, positions. Popular culture is made by the people at the interface between the products of the culture industries and everyday life. Popular culture is made by the people, not imposed upon them; it stems from within, from below, not from above. Popular culture is the art of making do with what the system provides (de Certeau 1984). The fact that the system provides only commodities, whether cultural or material, does not mean that the process of consuming those commodities can be adequately

described as one that commodifies the people into a homogenized mass at the mercy of the barons of the industry. People can, and do, tear their jeans.

## **THE COMMODITIES OF CULTURE**

Let us take television as the paradigm example of a culture industry, and trace the production and distribution of its commodities (or texts) within two parallel, semiautonomous economies, which we may call the *financial* (which circulates wealth in two subsystems) and the *cultural* (which circulates meanings and pleasures). They can be modeled thus:



### ***The Two Economies of Television***

The production studios produce a commodity, a program, and sell it to the distributors, the broadcasting or cable networks, for a profit. This is a simple financial exchange common to all commodities. But this is not the end of the matter, for a television program, or cultural commodity, is not the same sort of commodity as a material one such as a microwave oven or a pair of jeans. The economic function of a television program is not complete once it has been sold, for in *its* moment of consumption it changes to become a producer, and what it produces is an audience, which is then sold to advertisers.

For many, the most important product of the culture industries is the commodified audience to be sold to advertisers. Smythe (1977) argues that capitalism has extended its power

from the world of work into that of leisure, and so, by watching television and thus participating in the commodification of people we are working as hard for commodity capitalism as any worker on the assembly lines. This argument is both accurate and incisive as far as it goes, but it remains fixed within the economic base of society, and can explain meanings or ideologies only as mechanistically determined by that base. It can account for the popularity of jeans only in terms of their durability, cheapness, and easy availability, but not in terms of their variety of cultural meanings.

In a consumer society, all commodities have cultural as well as functional values. To model this we need to extend the idea of an economy to include a cultural economy where the circulation is not one of money, but of meanings and pleasures. Here the audience, from being a commodity, now becomes a producer, a producer of meanings and pleasures. The original commodity (be it a television program or pair of jeans) is, in the cultural economy, a text, a discursive structure of potential meanings and pleasures that constitutes a major resource of popular culture. In this economy there are no consumers, only circulators of meanings, for meanings are the only elements in the process that can be neither commodified nor consumed: meanings can be produced, reproduced, and circulated only in that constant process that we call culture.

We live in an industrial society, so of course our popular culture is an industrialized culture, as are all our resources; by "resources" I mean both semiotic or cultural ones and material ones—the commodities of both the financial and cultural economies. With very few and very marginal exceptions, people cannot and do not produce their own commodities, material or cultural, as they may have done in tribal or folk societies. In capitalist societies there is no so-called authentic folk culture against which to measure the "inauthenticity" of mass culture, so bemoaning the loss of the authentic is a fruitless exercise in romantic nostalgia.

However, the fact that the people cannot produce and circulate their own commodities does not mean that popular culture does not exist. As de Certeau (1984) puts it, people have to make do with what they have, and what they have are the products of the cultural (and other) industries. The creativity of

popular culture lies not in the production of commodities so much as in the productive use of industrial commodities. The art of the people is the art of "making do." The culture of everyday life lies in the creative, discriminating use of the resources that capitalism provides.

In order to be popular, then, cultural commodities have to meet quite contradictory needs. On the one hand there are the centralizing, homogenizing needs of the financial economy. The more consumers any one product can reach, and the more any one product can be reproduced by the existing processes within the cultural factory, the greater the economic return on it. It must therefore attempt to appeal to what people have in common, to deny social differences. What people in capitalist societies have in common is the dominant ideology and the experience of subordination or disempowerment. The economic needs of the cultural industries are thus perfectly in line with the disciplinary and ideological requirements of the existing social order, and all cultural commodities must therefore, to a greater or lesser extent, bear the forces that we can call centralizing, disciplinary, hegemonic, massifying, commodifying (the adjectives proliferate almost endlessly).

Opposing these forces, however, are the cultural needs of the people, this shifting matrix of social allegiances that transgress categories of the individual, or class or gender or race or any category that is stable within the social order. These popular forces transform the cultural commodity into a cultural resource, pluralize the meanings and pleasures it offers, evade or resist its disciplinary efforts, fracture its homogeneity and coherence, raid or poach upon its terrain. All popular culture is a process of struggle, of struggle over the meanings of social experience, of one's personhood and its relations to the social order and of the texts and commodities of that order. Reading relations reproduce and reenact social relations, so power, resistance, and evasion are necessarily structured into them.

As Stuart Hall (1981: 238) says,

The people versus the power-bloc: this, rather than "class-against-class," is the central line of contradiction around which the terrain of culture is polarized. Popular culture, especially, is organized around the contradiction: the popular forces versus the power-bloc.

This leads him to conclude that the study of popular culture should always start with "the double movement of containment and resistance, which is always inevitably inside it" (p. 228).

Tearing or bleaching one's jeans is a tactic of resistance; the industry's incorporation of this into its production system is a strategy of containment. Maintaining the relative autonomy of the cultural economy from the financial opens up cultural commodities to resistant or evasive uses: attempts to close the gap, to decrease the autonomy are further strategies of containment or incorporation. Advertising tries to control the cultural meanings of commodities by mapping them as tightly as possible onto the workings of the financial economy. Advertising works hard to match social differences with cultural differences with product differences.

White patriarchal capitalism has failed to homogenize the thinking and the culture of its subjects, despite nearly two centuries of economic domination (and much longer in the domains of gender and race). Our societies are intransigently diverse, and this diversity is maintained by popular and cultural forces in the face of a variety of strategies of homogenization. Of course capitalism requires diversity, but it requires a controlled diversity, a diversity that is determined and limited by the needs of its mode of production. It requires different forms of social control and different social institutions to reproduce itself and its subjects, so it produces class differences and fractional or sectional differences within those classes. The owners of capital can maintain their social position only because the social order in which they flourish has produced legal, political, educational and cultural systems that, in their own spheres, reproduce the social subjectivities required by the economic system.

But social diversity exceeds that required by capitalism, by patriarchy, by racial dominance. Of course patriarchy requires and thrives on gender differences, but it does not require feminism, it does not require women to opt out of marriage or to decide to raise children with no father figure. Racial dominance does not require black separatism, or that black high school students should opt out of the whitist educational system, to the extent that success in that system can be seen as a betrayal of blackness.

Society is structured around a complex matrix of axes of difference (class, gender, race, age, and so on), each of which has a dimension of power. There is no social difference without power difference, so one way of defining the popular is, as Hall does, to identify it by its oppositionality to "the power-bloc."

The popular can also be characterized by its fluidity. One person may, at different times, form cultural allegiances with different, not to say contradictory, social groups as he or she moves through the social formation. I may forge for myself quite different cultural allegiances to cope with and make sense of different areas of my everyday life. When, for instance, the age axis appears crucial, my allegiances may contradict those formed when, at other times, those of gender or class or race seem most pertinent.

People watching Archie Bunker, the bigoted male in *All in the Family*, made sense of him quite differently according to how they positioned themselves within the social formation and thus the cultural allegiances they forged. "His" meanings could and did move fluidly along the axes of class, age, gender, and race, to name only the most obvious, as viewers used him as a cultural resource to think through their social experience and the meanings they made out of it. The polysemic openness of popular texts is required by social differences and is used to maintain, question, and think through those differences.

Similarly, product differences are required by social differences, but do not produce them, though they can be used to maintain them. Advertising tries to maintain as close a match as possible between social difference and product difference, and to give the latter some control over the former. The ubiquity of advertising and the amount of resources it requires are evidence of how far social differences exceed the diversity required by the economic system. There is so much advertising only because it can never finally succeed in its tasks—those of containing social diversity within the needs of capitalism and of reducing the relative autonomy of the cultural economy from the financial, that is, of controlling not only what commodities people buy but the cultural uses they put them to. The advertising industry is undoubtedly successful at persuading manufacturers and distributors to buy its services: its success in persuading consumers to buy particular products is much

more open to question—between 80 per cent and 90 per cent of new products fail despite extensive advertising. To take another example, many films fail to recover even their promotional costs at the box office.

Information such as the fact that a 30-second television commercial can cost as much to produce as the 50-minute program into which it is inserted can lead to a moral panic about the subliminal manipulation of commercials being in direct proportion to their production values. Yet Collett's report for the IBA in London showed how typical it is for the TV viewer's attention to leave the screen as soon as the commercials appear. And the children who occasionally watch commercials so carefully are not necessarily being turned into helpless consumers. The Sydney children who in 1982 turned a beer commercial into a scatological playground rhyme were neither untypical nor commodified as they sang, "How do you feel when you're having a fuck, under a truck, and the truck rolls off? I feel like a Tooheys, I feel like a Tooheys, I feel like a Tooheys or two" (Fiske 1987a). Similarly, the kids who sang jeeringly at a female student of mine as she walked past them in a short skirt and high heels, "Razzmatazz, Razzmatazz, enjoy that jazz" (Razzmatazz is a brand of panty hose, and its jingle accompanied shots of long-legged models wearing the brightly colored products) were using the ad for their own cheeky resistive subcultural purposes: they were far from the helpless victims of any subliminal consumerism, but were able to turn even an advertising text into their popular culture.

Two recent reports add fuel to my optimistic skepticism. One tells us that the average Australian family has 1,100 advertisements aimed at it every day. Of these, 539 are in newspapers and magazines, 374 on TV, 99 on radio, and 22 at the movies. The remainder are flashed on illuminated signs or displayed on billboards, taxis, buses, shop windows, and supermarket checkouts. But, the research concluded, people remember only three or four ads each day (*Daily News*, 15 October 1987). Another survey tested recall of eight popular slogans from TV ads. A total of 300 women between ages 20 and 30 were tested to see if they could add the name of the product to the slogan. The highest score achieved was 14 per cent; the average was 6 per cent (*West Australian*, 2 November 1987). Neither of these

surveys evidences a terrifyingly powerful and manipulative industry that is a cause for moral panic.

Of course, all ads sell consumerism in general as well as a product in particular; their strategy of commodification is not in dispute, only its effectiveness. We all have a lifetime's experience of living in a consumer society and of negotiating our way through the forces of commodification, of which ads are one, but only one, and they are no more immune to subversion, evasion, or resistance than any other strategic force.

If a particular commodity is to be made part of popular culture, it must offer opportunities for resisting or evasive uses or readings, and these opportunities must be accepted. The production of these is beyond the control of the producers of the financial commodity: it lies instead in the popular creativity of the users of that commodity in the cultural economy.