

The New Validation of Popular Culture: Sense and Sentimentality in Academia

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□—*In recent years the study of popular culture has gained legitimacy in American universities. Several intellectual developments have stimulated this: a sociological perspective on the "production of culture" that tends to minimize the differences between high and popular culture; work in anthropology and other fields that has broadened the concept of what can be studied as a "text"; and increasing attention in several disciplines to the role of audiences in constructing the works of art they read or interpret. This essay critically reviews these developments and discusses their implications for the university.*

IN THE PAST generation, popular culture has attained a new legitimacy in American universities. Popular culture is now studied more often, in more different courses, in more departments, and with more sympathy than before. In literature, serious scholars can write on science fiction or on detective fiction or on romance novels, in short, on what is still often labeled as "trash." In history, the attention to popular culture has moved even further; the attention to the beliefs and practices of ordinary people actually has displaced studies of political, diplomatic, and military elites as the

leading edge of historical writing. In the interpretive social sciences, now rubbing up against and taking inspiration from the humanities, there is also a new freshness and new importance to the study of popular cultural forms.

The concept of popular culture has been revised entirely, and revitalized, by these developments. The result has been, in my opinion, a salutary new valuation of popular culture combined with an indiscriminatingly sentimental view of it. In the pages that follow, I describe the main intellectual lines that have produced this change, and I suggest that the new study of popular culture now offers a serious challenge to the identity of the modern university.

Popular culture can be understood broadly as beliefs and practices, and the objects through which they are organized, that are widely shared among a population.¹ These include both "folk" or "popular" beliefs, practices and objects rooted in local traditions, and also "mass" beliefs, practices, and objects

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generated from political and commercial centers. Until recently, scholars have tended to praise folk culture for its authenticity and decry mass culture for its commercial origin, its ideological aims, or its aesthetic blandness. Today the picture is more complex with scholars finding that authentic folk traditions often have metropolitan or elite roots and that mass culture often is authentically incorporated into ordinary people's everyday lives. It is therefore more hazardous than it used to be to make a rigid distinction between folk and mass culture. I will lump both categories under the general term, popular culture.

Conventionally, objects taken to be part of popular culture are *readable* objects, written or visual materials for which there are available traditions of interpretation and criticism. In recent years, the range of what is considered readable has expanded vastly: now spatial arrangements, household objects, advertisements, food and drink, dress, and youth cultural styles are all parts of readable cultural systems. The special task of interpretation, for many years left to the humanities, has become a more general subject to which anthropology, sociolinguistics, and psychoanalysis have contributed, creating a new convergence of the social sciences and humanities.

The study of popular culture can be broken down as the study of (a) the production of cultural objects, (b) the content of the objects themselves, and (c) the reception of the objects and the meanings attributed to them by the general population or subpopulations. In all three dimensions—the study of the production of culture, the study of texts, and the study of audiences—intellectual developments of the past generation have provided a new validation for the study of popular culture. This development raises a fundamental question that I will

take up later in the essay: what rationale remains for distinguishing “high” or “elite” culture from popular culture? If popular culture is valid for serious study, is there still a high culture that is *more* valid? That is, what justification remains for teaching—and thereby legitimating, even enshrining—some texts rather than others in university courses in the humanities? There is new thinking on this question, too, that has come out of historical and sociological accounts of the development of popular and high culture traditions and the evolution of a distinction between them. But let me begin with an examination of changes in the study of the producers, texts, and audiences of popular culture.

PRODUCING CULTURE: THE SOCIOLOGICAL EYE

In the 1960s, and 1970s, the study of the mass media in sociology changed in a way that has had influence well beyond the discipline. In sociology, there were two lines of discussion of popular culture dating to the 1940s and 1950s. One line of empirical studies, in both political science and sociology, looked for specific influences of mass media content on the attitudes or behavior or voting preferences of citizens. Growing out of a concern over propaganda in the 1930s and 1940s and, to some extent, out of a concern to make propaganda *effective* during World War II, these studies came to a surprising conclusion: the effect of the mass media on popular opinion was very small. People inherited voting inclinations from their parents or had their party preferences shaped by their occupational situations and their networks of friends and co-workers. Moreover, they attended to material in the mass media most likely to reinforce views they already held. Even when they came upon

opinions contradicting their own, they tended to misperceive them, very often as supportive of their own views. In the face of this selective attention and perception, the power of the media to persuade seemed much less than researchers had imagined.²

A second line of thought came out of European social criticism, especially the Frankfurt School work, rather than out of the American tradition of empirical social research. This body of thought developed a concept of "mass society" within the context of Nazi Germany but with an urgent sense that all of modern industrial society was vulnerable to "massification." Theorists of mass society saw the modern individual as alienated, isolated, lonely, and privatized. They saw institutions of social solidarity, the family, the neighborhood, the church, and the party, to be weakening, while the state and its connection to individuals through the mass media was growing steadily more powerful. Without local social institutions to fall back on, the individual became more and more susceptible to the siren song of the mass media and any demagogue who could control mass communication. In one of the most radical statements of this position, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno (1972) argued that popular entertainment, music, the movies, and the comics, spoke in a unified voice, drowning opposition to capitalism in the United States. The "culture industry," a term they coined for the whole array of entertainment industries, was an agent of mass deception, and they repeatedly drew parallels between the propaganda of Hitler and Goebbels and American commercial entertainment.

The one tradition, then, looked hard to find evidence of "media effects" and found little; the other tradition developed a coherent theoretical stance that imag-

ined overpowering ideological influence. In the period from the mid-fifties until the late sixties, American sociologists and political scientists largely stopped studying the mass media (although studies continued in the relatively new departments of communication or mass communication in major universities in the Midwest). Only with the rise in public concern over the news media during the Civil Rights Movement and especially during the war in Vietnam, and with the involvement of a good many social scientists themselves in these movements, did research on the mass media revive. When it did, it returned with people whose personal experiences or personal convictions made them think the media were quite powerful. The difficulty, however, was to say *how* powerful or powerful *in what way*.

There have been both theoretical and empirical answers to these questions. A theoretical effort has been to replace the notion of an overwhelmingly powerful mass culture with the more subtle, and more slippery, notion of "hegemony." The term comes from the work of Italian communist Antonio Gramsci who held that the state achieves its power not only through force but through defining a reality that citizens freely accept, a reality whereby the natural or inevitable right of the ruling class to rule is popularly taken for granted.³

Empirical studies have taken another road to the media effects question; many scholars have abandoned efforts to answer it directly and ask, instead, how mass media content is created, not what influence it has. This work can be seen as a different kind of reaction against the mass culture theorists. As Paul DiMaggio (1977) has suggested, the left wing critics of mass culture implicitly assume that mass culture is produced in a monopoly situation: The public will

absorb whatever the culture offers because only one product is available. The right wing critics of mass culture, on the other hand, implicitly assume a situation of perfect competition where the public gets whatever it desires (mass culture is of a miserable quality because *the public is uncivilized*). DiMaggio argues, instead, that the central features of mass culture are the "attributes of industries, not of societies" (p. 437). Some mass culture industries *are* in monopoly situations—the television industry (before cable) or public school textbook publishers. Other mass culture industries—trade books, records, movies, and magazines—create objects for specialized audiences, and their situation more closely resembles free competition. The diversity or innovativeness of the culture materials available to the public, DiMaggio concludes, has "more to do with the market structures and organizational environment of specific industries than with strongly felt demands of either the masses or their masters for certain kinds of homogeneous cultural materials (p. 448).

DiMaggio and the others in sociology and political science who have contributed to "production of culture" studies helped turn the social sciences toward the simple observation that cultural objects are *produced* by specific individuals and organizations under specific legal, economic, political, cultural, and organizational constraints. This obvious truth has had a number of far-reaching consequences for an understanding of culture.⁴

First, the insight has drawn attention to the role of *organizations* and *markets* in determining production. It has thus radically subsumed the sociological study of culture under the sociology of economic life and organizations. To the extent that paintings or novels or films

are things made by people and organizations as part of their effort to earn a living, they are not unlike automobiles and hardware and widgets. Important recognitions follow from this. For instance, once a cultural object is seen as an *organizational* product, some of its *formal features and thematic content* can be traced not to individual minds but to organizational interactions and constraints. For instance, over time, a newspaper's front page devotes about an equal measure to metropolitan, national, and foreign news. This is done not because an editor determines that they are of equal weight in the greater scheme of things. It is done because the news organization is divided into metropolitan, national, and foreign desks, each with an editor who vies for front-page play and whose demands must be satisfied by a managing editor. One of the things a managing editor manages is not news but people in their organizational roles (Sigal, 1973).

Second, if cultural objects such as romance novels or comic books or B movies are organizational products, are not fine fiction published by Farrar, Straus or experimental films made by independent film makers also organizational products? The *balance* of commercial motive and respect for artistic integrity may be different, but commercial motive is rarely absent in the production of high culture, and respect for artistic integrity often has a place in the production of popular culture.

The sociologizing influence of production of culture studies, then, has succeeded in democratizing or relativizing an approach to the study of culture. If Norman Mailer is distinguishable from Sidney Sheldon or Pablo Picasso from Leroy Neiman, it is not on the basis of craftsmanship versus crassmanship.

One factor that has boosted this socio-

logical insight is that more of the arts have become *collective* than was once the case. For the most part, the novel is as much an individual enterprise today as in the 1800s; to some extent, it has even become more individual and less institutional since a writer can write at his or her own pace without the institutional constraints of having to come up with a serial installment for a daily newspaper as Charles Dickens did. But the rise of *film* as a central modern art, and then its off-shoots in television and video, has made the notion that art is the result of idiosyncratic individual effort difficult to maintain. We *do* maintain it, and the whole point of "auteur" theory in film criticism is to rescue the concept that film, like the novel and like painting or sculpture, can be seen as a traditional art expressive of individual genius. Surely there is *some* truth in this. But with film, it is apparent that other candidates for genius arise, not just the director, who has been lifted by critics to the central role, but also (to name just two) the cinematographer and the leading actors.

Further, some of the modern arts, and particularly those connected to film, require not only a collection of skilled people for production but require a great deal of money, much more than the funds required to support a single artist. It may be, then, that the producer or fund raiser for film or for modern theater deserves some of the credit for authorship. It is certainly true that there is a more coherent critical community for fiction, where most skillful aspiring authors can find a publisher, than there is for film, where the aspiring film maker may very well not find the funds to support the equipment to do technically good work or, finding the funds, may not find a way to exhibit the product.

Some voices in literary theory now question the whole idea of "authorship,"

and people speak of the death of the author. Changes in the character of artistic production along with the recognition that, even with individual authors, art making happens within a social and institutional context have contributed to a sociologizing of the idea of authorship and some radical questioning of taken-for-granted distinctions between high culture and popular culture.

CULTURAL TEXTS: THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL EYE

One of the most stunning intellectual developments of the past generation came in the advances made by linguists in studying the structure of language. The advances of Noam Chomsky's structuralist revolution are today hotly debated inside linguistics, but the lesson for people outside has remained clear and constant: All human languages are equally complex. No language is closer to nature than the next. All have complicated, rule-governed arrangements for sound, syntax, and meaning. Even pidgins and creoles and dialectical variations are not degradations of a pure form of language, sloppy in adherence to rules, but new ruled systems of their own.

This insight served in some cases as inspiration for and, in most cases, can serve as metaphor for the relativizing trend in the social sciences and humanities for what objects are deserving of study. It is not that the humanities *needed* Chomsky or Jakobson or Levi-Strauss; they had, after all, a tradition of rhetorical studies on which they might have drawn. Rhetoricians saw the entire range of human verbal productions as appropriate objects for study. Aristotle drew special attention to political, legal, and ceremonial speech, but a 20th century descendant, Kenneth Burke, was just as ready to examine aphorisms and advertisements.

Yet the tradition of the humanities and especially literary study in the universities generally ignored Burke and others who sought to democratize the range of study-able texts and, instead, took it as their responsibility to define a canon of classic texts. This has been as true in art as in literature. Not simply students of art, university humanities departments have been promoters of their favorite artists and authors. More than most departments in a university, humanities departments are, perhaps necessarily, employers of scholars *engagé*, people deeply involved in *making* the very thing—elite culture—that they study. Barbara Herrnstein Smith describes the process with respect to Homer:

... the value of a literary work is continuously produced and reproduced by the very acts of implicit and explicit evaluation that are frequently invoked as "reflecting" its value and therefore as being evidence of it. In other words, what are commonly taken to be the *signs* of literary value are, in effect, also its *springs*. The endurance of a classic canonical author such as Homer, then, owes not to the alleged transcultural or universal value of his works but, on the contrary, to the continuity of their circulation in a particular culture. Repeatedly cited and recited, translated, taught, and imitated, and thoroughly enmeshed in the network of intertextuality that continuously *constitutes* the high culture of the orthodoxly educated population of the West ... that highly variable entity we refer to as "Homer" recurrently enters our experience in relation to a large number and variety of our interests and thus can perform a large number of various functions for us and obviously has performed them for many of us over a good bit of the history of our culture. (1984, pp. 34–35)

This is the kind of observation that literary scholars in recent years have begun to accept as they adopt a loosely sociological view of their own institution, understanding it as a hierarchical social

structure with larger social functions. Frank Kermode (1983), for instance, writes of literary studies as an institution, that "professional community which interprets secular literature and teaches others to do so" (p. 168). It has authority (not undisputed, he observes) "to define (or indicate the limits of) a subject; to impose valuations and validate interpretations." It is, he says, "a self-perpetuating, sempiternal corporation" (p. 169).

This skeptical stance toward the academic institution as an imposer of valuations has enlarged the number and kinds of texts acceptable for study in the humanities. More kinds of literary texts have been added to the reading lists. Further, the whole concept of textuality has been applied to materials not previously regarded as textual at all, and here anthropology has made the most notable contribution.

The field of anthropology long has been concerned with texts in the collection of oral tales and myths of primitive peoples. Different anthropologists, studying the same group at different times and working with different informants, naturally picked up different variants of stories and folk tales. Piecing together from different variants the most authentic one, or concluding that *each* variant is authentic by its own light, anthropologists have worked with texts, the written-down versions of the orally transmitted tales, in understanding cultures. But anthropology has gone far beyond this still conventional understanding of the text to look upon rituals, games, and performances as interpretable texts that people *make*, and intend as meaningful objects that should be interpreted.

The most widely known instance of this kind of work is the essay by Clifford Geertz on the cockfight in Bali (1973).

This essay shows the ways the Balinese cockfight represents and heightens the importance of social solidarities and social divisions in Balinese society. It also shows how the cockfight represents and heightens important psychological tendencies in Balinese personality, especially those surrounding the relationship between the Balinese man and his "cock." Geertz treads familiar ground here in connecting a cultural object to its social and psychological moorings, but he refuses to reduce the cultural object to its underpinnings. He insists that the cockfight is textual in that it is not only a reflection of a social setting or a psychological predisposition but an articulation and production of meaning. The cockfight does not express what Balinese society is but what, in a kind of collective thought-experiment, Balinese society might be if certain emotional tendencies were taken to their logical extreme. The cockfight is a safe way, culturally framed, to test out what happens when certain tendencies in the social order go unchecked, just as, Geertz argues, *King Lear* is a collective thought-experiment about what happens when fathers and daughters do not show appropriate love and respect for one another. Geertz holds that an observer can *read* the cockfight as a text just as a critic can read *King Lear* as a text.

Another anthropologist, Victor Turner, also emphasizes the readability of performances and the centrality of performances in social life. He looks especially at what he calls "social dramas," be they in a court of law or an assembly of elders or in some other ritual mode for dramatizing social conflict. Like Geertz, Turner (1984) argues that the social drama does not re-state or mirror underlying social structure but acts as a performance in society's "subjunctive" mood. Ritual, carnival, festival, theater,

and other cultural performances express "supposition, desire, hypothesis, possibility" rather than fact. All of these cultural forms can be seen as ways a culture thinks out loud about itself. Barbara Babcock (1984, p. 107), for instance, discusses Southwest Indian clown performances as a kind of acted-out philosophizing, a meta-language and commentary on social life that "disrupts and interrupts customary frames and expected logic and syntax and creates a reflexive and ironic dialogue, an open space of questioning."

The anthropology of performance is linked closely to conventional literary criticism since, of course, there long has been attention to the performative genres of theater and, to a limited extent, poetry. A performance, like a literary work, is an activity in which the author is oriented to and intends to have some effect on an audience. This attention to performance has not only added something to the conventional notion of text but acts back upon it as sociolinguists, anthropologists, and folklorists have urged the re-integration of the study of texts into their social and often "performed" contexts. Studies of oral poetry leapt ahead when scholars showed that the structure and form of works such as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* derive from their roots in an oral, memorized, improvised, and performed mode of composition (Finnegan, 1977).

In this regard, one might go so far as to say that the literary text, as conventionally understood, is a peculiar form of a cultural performance where the author does not relate to the audience face to face and where the relative permanency of the mode of recording separates the performance also from the immediacy of even the author. A literary text, one might say, is a performance that has a life of its own.

Anthropologists have gone further still. With respect to texts and performances, there is always the supposition that the cultural act or object is a somewhat self-conscious commentary on social life. With some aspects of culture, there may be a symbolic system operating at an identifiable level but one of which people are so little conscious that they may even deny its existence. Mary Douglas (1982) has "deciphered" the meaning of a meal, seeing food as a system of cultural communication and the meal as an organized, structured text that comments on social organization. She also has examined consumer goods as a medium through which culture is constituted. Commodities, in her view, are not so much good for consuming as they are "good for thinking; treat them as a nonverbal medium for the human creative faculty" (Douglas, 1979, p. 62). Vast areas of human activity then become expressions of human creativity, texts that can be deciphered, structures that have interpretable forms: not only staged performances or culturally framed rituals but the performances and rituals of everyday behavior that Erving Goffman studied so well—etiquette, public displays, the small interactions at a bus stop or in nearly any interactional setting where a person communicates messages about him or herself to others nearby.

Compared to this radical extension of the notion of textuality, the inclusion of new literary forms into the acceptable canon for literary studies seems a minor footnote in intellectual history. Of course, it has not been experienced that way. The universities are conservators of tradition, protectors of what they regard as the best and most valuable monuments to human invention and creative expression. It is therefore in some ways easier

to accept the cockfight for study than the popular romance or the codes of fashion than television soap operas. The cockfight is sufficiently exotic to be beyond our own culture's status ranking of cultural forms. The romance and the soap opera, in contrast, hold a place—a very low place—in this society's established hierarchy of literary taste.

Now that sociologists and literary scholars alike hold up for examination the social processes whereby hierarchies of taste get established, should the hierarchies be granted any remaining authority? If the "lower" forms of culture deserve study, not just as data for social science but as literary texts meriting the same attention one might give Shakespeare, does this change what the university is supposed to be about? Does it call for a radical change or extension in what we take the mission of the university to be? This is a thorny and a fundamental issue. On the one hand, nothing that is human should be foreign to the "humanities" in a university, and African or Asian or American Indian literature should have as much place as Shakespeare or Dickens in a university education; on the other hand, American universities are, and intend to be, carriers of and promoters of Western traditions of art and thought, and their curricula cannot and should not be encyclopedic. They must be pedagogic. That is, the selection of materials presented, let alone the ways of presenting them, are a vital part of the university's educational endeavor. Selection is *the* vital part, in the view of Bartlett Giamatti (1980), who argues that the main task of the teacher is the task of *choosing* where to begin and what to begin with. On the one hand, it seems perfectly appropriate to study formulaic literatures, romances or detective stories, to see how they work,

to think about *why* so many people respond so eagerly to them, and to contemplate the meaning of form and formula and genre in literature generally. On the other hand, there is justification for a critical tradition that pays greatest tribute to work that challenges form, breaks or becomes self-conscious about formula, blurs the boundaries of genres, or seems to surpass the limits of meaning possible within a genre. Watchers of baseball are more interested in learning lessons from Pete Rose than from Joe Schmo, and people who enjoy eating pay greater attention to the Sunday dinner that someone takes hours to prepare than the Wednesday leftovers dumped on the table. The making of distinctions and the making of judgments of better or worse, more or less complex, more or less memorable or enduring or pleasing were not invented by power-hungry elites or greedy institutions (though elites and institutions certainly have taken advantage of their power to make *their* judgments the reigning judgments).

It may be—it certainly remains the common-sense intuition—that different qualities of art reside in the thing itself: some paintings or performances or poems are better than others. But it is now argued with equal vigor that the quality of art lies in how it is received, or in how it is created within the context of reception, rather than in some quality intrinsic to the art object itself. Roland Barthes argues we have moved from an emphasis on the Work (the pristine object with intrinsic quality) to engagement with the Text, something that is produced by reader as much as by writer, by critic or interpreter as much as by author. The quality of *reading* rather than the quality of the object then takes center stage and the critic is more producer than evaluator or consumer.

Indeed, for Barthes, as long as a person reads passively, it matters little if the reading matter is Shakespeare or subway graffiti. The task is to read *playfully*, playing the text “in the musical sense of the term” (Barthes, 1979, p. 79). And the task for the humanities in the university, I would infer from this, is not to create hierarchies of Works but to educate readers in reading. If this can be done with Shakespeare, fine; if it is better achieved with newspaper cartoons, that’s fine, too. The task is to diminish the distance between writer and reader, writing and reading, and encourage students to be players.

The notion of the ideal reader as a “player” is not the only model of how a reader should read. Perhaps a more common understanding is that a good reader reads *critically*, reads “against the text” in the terms of one critic or reads “as a process of inaugurating disbelief” according to another (Altieri, 1984, pp. 60–61). Charles Altieri urges that good readers read through a text, submitting to “its provisional authority” as a work of art. Without abandoning a sense of critical reading, this position comes close to Barthes’ notion of play and recommends to the reader an attitude that the anthropologists cited earlier would recognize as resembling the “subjunctive” mood.⁵ It emphasizes gaining familiarity and facility more than distance and perspective but nonetheless a kind of facility that presumes perspective.

Suppose that the university sees its task as one of educating students to read against texts and to be players of texts. At some point, the question will still arise about who is a better player and who a worse player and who is to judge and what rules of play need to be observed. The radical democratization that appears

when the Work is demoted to the Text does not do away with the desire for distinctions; the university must still determine, in a re-defined context, what values it should be promoting.

THE AUDIENCE: THE TEXT'S VULNERABILITY

The movement in literary studies that Barthes identifies as a shift from Work to Text has parallels in a different field of inquiry, the sociology of ideology and the sociology of culture. The audience, in social science studies of the mass media and popular culture, has been (like the weather) something that everybody talks about and nobody does anything about. And yet in recent years a number of scholars have finally paid attention to how audiences use the media and how they employ popular culture, while reshaping it, in their own lives.

One exemplary study is sociological without having come from sociology: Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* (1984), a study of romance novels and their readers. Feminist literary critics have begun to pay some attention to "women's literature" meaning, by that, literature frequently read by women. Most critics, including Radway, find the romance novels to be politically reactionary, generally suggesting in very predictable and stylized plots that a woman's fulfillment in life comes from capturing a man, a man with repressed emotions and a somewhat brutal attitude toward women who, nonetheless, because of some prior suffering in his own life, can learn (through the guidance of the heroine) to express true love. Not infrequently, romance novels even rationalize or explain away the hero's rape of the heroine.

What more, then, needs to be said to condemn romance novels? Radway in-

terviewed at length some 20 women who read large quantities of romance fiction. She learned a number of very interesting things about them. First, she learned that there is not one generalized mass public for romances but that different women respond to and seek out very different kinds of romantic fantasies. (The women she interviewed devour novel after novel but look down contemptuously upon women who watch television soap operas.) Second, she learned that the women interpret the novels very differently from feminist critics. They read *more literally*. When the narrator says that the heroine was a beautiful, bright, and independent woman, and then presents incident after incident that deny her independence (and shed some doubt on her intelligence), the romance readers see the story as one of a strong woman who makes the best of her life in the midst of great adversity. The feminist critic, in contrast, takes the initial description of the independent woman to be ironic in the context of the heroine's actual behavior. Third, whatever ideological message the women may take from the novel, they use the *act of reading* the novels as a bid for independence in their home lives. Most of the women Radway interviewed were high school or, in some cases, college-educated women with part-time or full-time work outside the home and a full set of wifely and motherly chores inside the home, too. In many instances, opening their novel and propping up their feet to read signaled to husband and children that these women were temporarily unavailable and should not be disturbed. It was an assertion of independence and of a right of their own time that apparently was effective in protecting them from demands of the domestic scene.

Of course, there is a lot more one would like to know about these women and their reading. But the point Radway

makes most provocatively is that the presumptuousness of the critic to say what a work means has to be questioned and can be questioned, in part, on the basis of empirical studies of what readers get from books. This is an empirical or sociological enactment of the theoretical developments in criticism that suggest that readers and critics construct texts in the act of reading. This does not necessarily mean, however, that the readers construct the texts creatively or playfully or critically. Their responses, while not determined by the text of the romance novel as a prefabricated and autonomous entity, may be shaped by other prefabricated texts, the ideologies and fantasies of popular culture at large that serve as background for reading the romance.⁶

The view that readers construct their own texts (whether critically and creatively or not) is supported by a long line of psychological research on selective attention and selective perception. There is, for instance, a study by Neil Vidmar and Milton Rokeach (1974) that found that the message of *All in the Family* was read differently depending on people's preconceptions. Highly prejudiced viewers enjoyed the show because they could applaud Archie Bunker's sentiments and see him portrayed as a likeable hero. Tolerant viewers enjoyed the show because they could sympathize with the other characters and see Archie Bunker as the butt of jokes, his own prejudices coming back to haunt him or tie him in impossible contradictions.

There is also support for this view in sociological studies of working class culture and youth culture, which demonstrate that people outside the dominant power structures of society can turn commercial products, including music, movies, and television, to their own use, creating a mocking vernacular out of the culture that comes down to them from on

high. Whether it is working-class "lads" creating a culture of resistance inside the British school system (Willis, 1977) or hot rodders turning mass-produced vehicles into individual signatures of machismo and power (Moorhouse, 1983), sociologists are finding significant instances where the conventional meaning of a standard product has been altered, reversed, or upended by small or local groups and subcultures with traditions and agenda of their own. (There are also important instances where an authentic subculture uses a mass culture industry as its own medium—Southern black blues musicians in the 1920s preserved and spread their art through the popular record industry [Levine, 1977].)

Are these audiences, then, playful? Able to read against or through texts? Or are they, alternatively, egocentric, making their own meanings from the texts not because they have read through them expertly but because they have not learned to truly read? Are Radway's romance readers *good* readers? Do they see the novels as displaying possible strategies for coping with women's subordinate role in patriarchal society? Is romance reading in their experience a "collectively elaborated female ritual through which women explore the consequences of their common social condition as the appendages of men and attempt to imagine a more perfect state where all the needs they so intensely feel and accept as given would be adequately addressed" (Radway, 1984, p. 221)? If so, then these readers are, as Radway sometimes suggests, very good readers indeed. But do the women experience reading this way? Why do they read the books' endings before buying them? Why do they insist that sad endings are unsatisfactory? Why are they uneasy with genres (like the television soap opera) that do not come to conclusions?

Why do variations in the basic, prefabricated, predictable plot line and character line of romances make them uncomfortable? Have they really played with the novels or simply drifted under their spell? Have they submitted to the provisional authority of the work or given it, momentarily, absolute authority? And what would be the measure of their quality as readers?

Think of the readers of Eugene Sue's serialized melodramas in 19th century France: many of them were very active readers, even to the point of writing letters to Sue to implore him to change the plot or to protect a particularly lovable character from harm. Sue, in fact, altered his writing to accord with some of these requests. Other readers treated Sue's characters the way some television soap opera viewers treat the characters they follow so avidly—as real people, not engaging fictions. Sue was asked, for instance, to release one of his evil-fighting heroes to deal with actual crimes (Brooks, 1984, p. 164).

Here the space between writer and reader has narrowed, but is this the kind of reader Barthes or anyone else would want to encourage? These readers, we might say, are active but *not* playful; they do not understand that fiction is play, and, consequently, they do not learn to play with fiction. The first lesson about reading is probably that reading can be useful (you can read instructions) or that it can provide a measure of independence (you can entertain yourself in the absence of mother or father) or that it can be fun and exciting. Sue's readers knew all this. But the second lesson about reading is that a written text is not, or not only, a window on the world but is an imaginative construction. I agree with Peter Brooks that critics have spent too much energy on the second lesson—how is a text constructed to

do its task—and not enough on the first: Why do people want to know what happens next? But is a person genuinely a reader if he or she remains unaware of the second lesson?

The study of specific audiences should be linked also to the study of the emergence of audiences historically. There has been important work recently on the development of the distinction between high culture and popular culture in the United States and the cultivation of an audience for high culture. Lawrence Levine's study of Shakespeare performance in 19th century America (1984) and Paul DiMaggio's study of the creation of a sphere of high culture in 19th century Boston (1982) both demonstrate that creating high culture was as much a task of shaping an audience as of consolidating a canon of legitimated works. In the early 19th century, Shakespeare was part of general popular culture in America. By 1900, this was no longer true. In part, the nature of Shakespeare's work matched other cultural currents and inclinations more closely in 1850 than in 1900; it better fit a population that delighted in and responded to oratory, melodrama, and heroes who could be seen as "architects of their own fortunes" (Levine, 1984, p. 53) than it did a population grown used to utilitarian uses of language and grown more interested in heroes and anti-heroes struggling in complex social and institutional webs. But also, in part, an upper class that felt threatened by a growing and ethnically diverse group of upwardly mobile seekers sought out certain features of culture, especially English language culture, that it could assign special moral and aesthetic value and keep safe and apart. After 1900, Shakespeare no longer belongs to the general public but to Culture, capitalized. To attend Shakespeare not only costs money but requires

an educated audience, educated to appreciate the plays and to behave properly in the theater. Shakespeare audiences in 1850 were players, not consumers, of theatrical presentations (Would Barthes have approved?) and would respond vocally and demonstratively to the action on stage. We have very little comparable to this today in film or theater except among the audiences for certain cult films such as *Rocky Horror Picture Show* and, perhaps, among audiences for professional wrestling. Audiences for sporting events today are probably closest to the Shakespeare audiences of 1850.

The audience itself, then, not just the products created for cultural consumption, is a social construction, a product of a sort in its own way. This is true for the audiences of elite culture as much as for audiences of popular culture, although the two audiences are cultivated and maintained by two very different organizational forms—mass culture industries for the popular audience and private associations supported by private philanthropy and some governmental subvention, plus the institutions of higher education, for the elite audience. While social scientists have begun to study the audiences that differ from middle class expectations of audience behavior, they so far have paid only scant attention to the social processes that create the standard audience for high culture. The work of Pierre Bourdieu (1984) has begun to open up this area, but there is much to be done to understand how the rules of audience behavior and etiquette are arrived at, how the norms of polite conversation and comment following a play or concert are constructed, or even what the regulations of appropriate behavior in the school classroom mean.

Audiences, including the audiences for high culture, are not born but made. If

anything, this is even more true in the age of modernism and its successors than it was before. Most justifications of the humanities tend to rest on the virtues of their study for moral education, for an enlargement of the individual's vision of what the human condition is and can be. But it is not clear to me, at any rate, that this rationale can be connected to many of the leading experiments in art, music, and literature in our time. Many of these developments seem to focus on the formal properties of art, music, and literature themselves; their subject turns out to be art making, music making, or writing as activities. They may comment on but do not intend to comment on the human condition except insofar as art making is the human condition (a contention they do not explore). Many of the leading movements in modern arts posit or hope for a degree of autonomy of the aesthetic sense unprecedented in human experience. The equivalent in popular culture is the emphasis on "special effects," in films, in theme parks, or in 4th of July celebrations. Audiences may enjoy the dazzle or they may engage in the intellectual detective work of trying to figure out how a special effect was achieved, but they are not likely to be looking to these effects for moral guidance or commentary on the human condition.

SENSE AND SENTIMENTALITY

So far, I have reviewed, generally approvingly, intellectual developments of the past two decades that have profound implications for our understanding of culture. First, I have reviewed the sociological insight that cultural products are created by groups as well as by individuals and that, even with individual artists, cultural products are oriented to a small or large degree to a market-

place and to a socially constructed "art world." This insight relativizes or democratizes works of art and raises questions about the distinction that universities have made between high culture and popular or mass culture. Second, I have reviewed developments in the study of texts that vastly enlarge the range of texts appropriate for serious study. This trend suggests an equivalence across texts whereby judgments of quality do not have pride of place and may not have much of a place at all. Third, I have looked at changing views of the audience that give credit to the audience, any audience, as a privileged critic or reader, even, *creator* of the texts it reads or watches. Once again, the tendency is to relativize the concept of culture, to whittle away at the props that maintain some elements of culture as higher than others.

There is a lot of justifiable excitement about these developments. Barriers to the halls of academe are breached by cultural objects that never before had seen the inside of a classroom; hallways between departments where professors did not know one another existed are now well worn. There has been a real liberation in all of this, based, in my view, on very good intellectual sense.

But with each of the intellectual movements I have reviewed here, there is a corresponding danger. With the sociological approach to artistic production, there is the threat of cynicism; with the democratization of the number and kinds of texts worthy of study, there is a danger of obscuring the special features of *written* texts; and, most of all, with the recognition of the active role of audiences in constructing the works they engage, there is a danger of romanticizing and sentimentalizing audiences as they exist in certain inhumane social conditions.

Production. While it is true that all art

is produced by someone or some ones, not all production aims to manufacture or manufactures art. Some organizations produce toothpicks or ball bearings or toilet paper, not textbooks or soap operas. And producing the textbooks or soap operas *is* different. Certainly useful things (toothpicks) may have meanings and just as surely meaningful things (soap operas) may be useful, but for most things there is no difficulty in distinguishing whether utility or meaning is the primary feature. That there are university departments and international conferences and bibliographies overflowing on William Shakespeare, who produced plays, and not on Clarence Birdseye, who produced frozen foods, is not just an accident nor just a prejudice of people who disdain mass culture. The difference between meaning and utility remains important; the sociologizing trend in the understanding of artistic production does not erase it but asks that it be understood more carefully.

Texts. The fact that an anthropologist or literary critic can read an evening meal or a fast food advertisement or the names of athletic teams or the design of Disneyland as a commentary or metacommentary on culture does not mean that participant natives also read the texts that way. There is some danger that the recent trends in the study of popular culture may inadvertently romanticize the semiotic process itself; the academy's professional interest and pleasure in the act of interpreting can be self-indulgent, and the readings of meals or ads may be only academic *etudes* if these objects are not privileged as signs by the general community. Anthropologist Bruce Kapferer has recognized this problem:

Most anthropologists argue that rituals make metacommentaries, and thus are reflexive upon the nonritualized, paramount reality of

everyday life. But the anthropologist is in a position that would lead to such an observation: the anthropologist is never completely part of the culture being studied, but always apart from it. The subjects of research, the people, are also objects; and this is demanded by the nature of the anthropological discipline. The anthropologist, in a sense, assumes the role of a critic, for particular events are placed in the context of other events, are interrelated, contrasted, and evaluated. Therefore, while rituals might typically be regarded as reflexive events by anthropologists, it does not necessarily follow that they will be similarly regarded by participants. (1984, p. 203)

There is something democratic about opening up the range of things taken to be textual and accessible to interpretation, but it is as presumptuous to offer critical readings of popular artifacts as it is to interpret high culture artifacts without reference to what the actual audiences may be thinking. Sometimes, as Kapferer suggests, the artifact may be one in which the natives invest a great deal of interpretive energy themselves; sometimes, however, it will be an object that the people in question do not, in fact, think with. Vincent Crapanzano (1986) has made this point about Geertz's celebrated cockfight, that Geertz offers no evidence that the Balinese themselves see the cockfight as a text to be read, no evidence that the cockfight is marked in Balinese culture as a cultural object to be interpreted. Geertz's own interpretive virtuosity, without such support, may then be an instance of the academy's semiotic aggrandizement.

But do we not think with *all* the objects in our environment? Yes, at some level we do. But cultures do not invest all objects with equal amounts of meaning. For urban Americans, say, the power of the distinctions among street/road/avenue/court/place is much greater than that among elm/oak/maple/spruce,

even though both sets of categories are part of the culture. These natives may find it worthwhile to interpret both the Sunday comics and the Sunday sermon, but they will most likely find disagreements over the sermon more troubling and the task of interpretation more significant and the value of skilled interpreters correspondingly greater.

Moreover, there is with some objects in the culture a tradition of interpretation that is cumulative and, for this reason, has acquired a sophistication or refinement that everyday interpretation does not attain. While such cumulative traditions exist with respect to a number of kinds of objects, they are especially noteworthy with respect to *written* materials, and, not incidentally, the interpretations themselves are carried on in writing. Written texts provide something that most other objects do not: the possibility of a tradition of criticism that makes an enormous difference in developing and elaborating reflective thought (Goody, 1977). It is not that analysis and reflection are impossible or even unlikely without writing, but a *sustained* tradition of reflection is unlikely. Certainly there can be a connoisseurship with respect to cockfights or culinary arts that exists primarily in oral culture. But with all its richness, oral culture also has its limits. The celebration of cockfights and culinary arts and clown dances in the university is all to the good so long as we do not forget that the medium of that celebration, the medium that makes thinking about these objects so interesting and enables an enlargement of our vision about what human cultures are about, is still the written word.

Audiences. It is right to observe that audiences do not absorb culture like sponges. The popular audience is selective, reflective, and constructive in its use of culture. But this is not to say that the

popular audience is always critical or creative in its responses any more than elite audiences are. Even within an individual, a person responds differently to different cultural experiences. Very critical and searching readers of fiction may let music wash right over them at a concert; a discerning reader of poetry may not be able to stand before a painting in a gallery for more than a few seconds. Some people who are discriminating consumers of theater may rely on "name brands" for dance. Such people know very well, or should know, that they are more active, playful, critical, or creative in responding to some cultural objects than in responding to others.

If we can recognize such distinctions for individuals, then why not for groups? If we know, further, that in many of the areas where we *are* critical readers we have gone through a process of education, formal or informal, why can we not conclude that processes of education are central to critical and playful readings in general? And if we can say this, can we not also say, indeed, must we not affirm also that one of the tasks of education, not only in the schools and universities but in the structure of society as a whole, is, as Raymond Williams put it, "to deepen and refine the capacity for significant responses" (1983, p. 62)? The fact that popular audiences respond actively to the materials of mass culture is important to recognize and understand, but it is not a fact that should encourage us to accept mass culture as it stands or popular audiences as they now exist. The fact that different subgroups in the population respond in different ways to common cultural objects or have developed refined critical temperaments with regard to some local or provincial cultural form unrecognized by elites is important to understand and should lead us to recognize a wide variety of connoisseur-

ships and a plurality of educational forms that lead to them. But this is not or should not be to admit all cultural forms equal, all interpretations valid, all interpretive communities self-contained and beyond criticism.

The celebration of popular culture and popular audiences in the universities has been a political act; it could not have been otherwise. The challenge popular culture now presents the university is not a call to erase all boundaries to what is to be treated in a classroom. Rather, it is to force a self-conscious and sociologically self-aware defense of the boundaries the university draws. The challenge is not to deny a place for judgment and valuation but to identify the institutional, national, class, race, and gender-bound biases set deep in past judgments and to make them available for critical reassessment. The new validation of popular culture should not lead higher education to abandon its job of helping students to be critical and playful readers, helping to deepen and refine in them a capacity for significant response. Instead, it should enhance these efforts with new respect for how, in some spheres and in some ways and despite some limits, students (and others) have been critical and playful readers all along.

The essay should end there. It would have, if I thought I had resolved the problems I presented.

I do not. I end up caught between a belief that the university should be a moral educator, holding up for emulation some values and some texts (and not others), and a reluctant admission that defining the basis of moral education is an unfinished, often unrecognized, task. I know, of course, that the university is a moral educator whether this is intended or not. Students learn from teachers what we value, by what values we "profess" to work, and what turns of mind or

character we approve. But if we learn to be self-conscious about the implicit hierarchies of taste and value we live and teach by, will we locate adequate grounds for our moral claims? What ground can we stand on, especially when the trends that favor relativism are so much more powerful and cogent (to my own mind) than the rather arbitrary and ill-defended hierarchies of value they so pointedly confront?

If there is sentimentality on one side—would-be populists waving the banner of people's culture—there is piety on the other—ardent champions of a traditional curriculum wailing at the decline of lit-

eracy, values, morals, the university, or their students' ability to write (or even recognize) a good English sentence. Neither side seems to me very clear about the pass we have reached. We can all carry on, nevertheless: Departments and professional associations will sustain the structures for individual careers; institutional and personal investments in things as they are will keep us from looking too closely at the intellectual crisis we have come upon. But if we ever come to separating sense from romance and standards from nostalgia in all of this, it is not going to be easy. □

NOTES

¹This definition and some of the framework for this essay are adapted from Mukerji and Schudson (1986).

²A review and critique of much of this literature is Sears and Freedman (1971). Another critique that takes a broader look at the conclusion that the media have limited effects is Gitlin (1978).

³Gramsci's views and the uses of his concept of hegemony are well reviewed in Lears (1985).

⁴There is now a large literature on the production of culture within sociology. For a sampling, see Peterson (1976). An early and influential essay in this vein is Hirsch (1972). Some of the work is reviewed in Peterson (1979). A related approach coming out of fieldwork and symbolic interactionist traditions is well represented in Becker (1982).

⁵On the subjunctive mood as a feature of literature generally, see Bruner (1986).

⁶I am grateful to Richard Terdiman for this observation.

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