Cultural Theory and Popular Culture
An Introduction

Fifth edition

John Storey
University of Sunderland

Harlow, England • London • New York • Boston • San Francisco • Toronto
Sydney • Tokyo • Singapore • Hong Kong • Seoul • Taipei • New Delhi
Cape Town • Madrid • Mexico City • Amsterdam • Munich • Paris • Milan

In Chapter 3 we shall begin to consider some of these radical and often unforeseen consequences as they appear in the work of Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams.

Mass culture in America: the post-war debate

In the first fifteen or so years following the end of the Second World War, American intellectuals engaged in a debate about so-called mass culture. Andrew Ross (1989) sees 'mass' as 'one of the key terms that governs the official distinction between American/UnAmerican' (42). He argues that, '[t]he history behind this official distinction is in many ways the history of the formation of the modern national culture' (ibid.). Following the Second World War, America experienced the temporary success of a cultural and political consensus – supposedly based on liberalism, pluralism and classlessness. Until its collapse in the agitation for black civil rights, the formation of the counterculture, the opposition to America's war in Vietnam, the women's liberation movement, and the campaign for gay and lesbian rights, it was a consensus dependent to a large extent on the cultural authority of American intellectuals. As Ross points out: 'For perhaps the first time in American history, intellectuals, as a social grouping, had the opportunity to recognize themselves as national agents of cultural, moral, and political leadership' (43). This newly found significance was in part due to 'the intense, and quite public, debate about "mass culture" that occupied intellectuals for almost fifteen years, until the late fifties' (ibid.). Ross spends most of his time relating the debate to the Cold War ideology of 'containment': the need to maintain a healthy body politic both within (from the dangers of cultural impoverishment) and without (from the dangers of Soviet communism). He identifies three positions in the debate:

1. An aesthetic–liberal position that bemoans the fact that given the choice the majority of the population choose so-called second- and third-rate cultural texts and practices in preference to the texts and practices of high culture.
2. The corporate–liberal or progressive–evolutionist position that claims that popular culture serves a benign function of socializing people into the pleasures of consumption in the new capitalist–consumerist society.
3. The radical or socialist position which views mass culture as a form of, or means to, social control.

Towards the end of the 1950s, the debate became increasingly dominated by the first two positions. This reflected in part the growing McCarthyite pressure to renounce anything resembling a socialist analysis. Given limited space, I will focus only on the debate about the health of the body politic within. In order to understand the debate one publication is essential reading – the anthology *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America*, published in 1957. Reading the many contributions, one quickly gets a sense

of the parameters of the debate – what is at stake in the debate, and who are the principal participants.

Bernard Rosenberg (co-editor with David Manning White) argues that the material wealth and well-being of American society are being undermined by the dehumanizing effects of mass culture. His greatest anxiety is that, 'At worst, mass culture threatens not merely to cretinize our taste, but to brutalize our senses while paving the way to totalitarianism' (1957: 9). He claims that mass culture is not American by nature, or by example, nor is it the inevitable culture of democracy. Mass culture, according to Rosenberg, is nowhere more widespread than in the Soviet Union. Its author is not capitalism, but technology. Therefore America cannot be held responsible for its emergence or for its persistence. White (1957) makes a similar point but for a different purpose. 'The critics of mass culture' (13), White observes, 'take an exceedingly dim view of contemporary American society' (14). His defence of American (mass) culture is to compare it with aspects of the popular culture of the past. He maintains that critics romanticize the past in order to castigate the present. He condemns those 'who discuss American culture as if they were holding a dead vermin in their hands' (ibid.), and yet forget the sadistic and brutal reality of animal baiting that was the everyday culture in which Shakespeare's plays first appeared. His point is that every period in history has produced 'men who preyed upon the ignorance and insecurities of the largest part of the populace . . . and therefore we need not be so shocked that such men exist today' (ibid.). The second part of his defence consists of cataloguing the extent to which high culture flourishes in America: for example, Shakespeare on TV, record figures for book borrowing from libraries, a successful tour by the Sadler's Wells Ballet, the fact that more people attend classical music events than attend baseball games, the increasing number of symphony orchestras.

A key figure in the debate is Dwight Macdonald. In a very influential essay, 'A theory of mass culture', he attacks mass culture on a number of fronts. First of all, mass culture undermines the vitality of high culture. It is a parasitic culture, feeding on high culture, while offering nothing in return.

> Folk art grew from below. It was a spontaneous, autochthonous expression of the people, shaped by themselves, pretty much without the benefit of High Culture, to suit their own needs. Mass Culture is imposed from above. It is fabricated by technicians hired by businessmen; its audience are passive consumers, their participation limited to the choice between buying and not buying. The Lords of kitsch, in short, exploit the cultural needs of the masses in order to make a profit and/or to maintain their class-rule . . . in Communist countries, only the second purpose obtains. Folk art was the people's own institution, their private little garden walled off from the great formal park of their masters' High Culture. But Mass Culture breaks down the wall, integrating the masses into a debased form of High Culture and thus becoming an instrument of political domination (1998: 23).

Like other contributors to the debate, Macdonald is quick to deny the claim that America is the land of mass culture: 'the fact is that the U.S.S.R. is even more a land

of Mass Culture than is the U.S.A' (ibid.). This fact, he claims, is often missed by critics who focus only on the 'form' of mass culture in the Soviet Union. But it is mass culture (not folk culture: the expression of the people; nor high culture: the expression of the individual artist); and it differs from American mass culture in that 'its quality is even lower', and in that 'it exploits rather than satisfies the cultural needs of the masses . . . for political rather than commercial reasons' (24). In spite of its superiority to Soviet mass culture, American mass culture still represents a problem ('acute in the United States'): 'The eruption of the masses onto the political stage [produced] . . . disastrous cultural results' (ibid.). This problem has been compounded by the absence of 'a clearly defined cultural elite' (ibid.). If one existed, the masses could have mass culture and the elite could have high culture. However, without a cultural elite, America is under threat from a Gresham's Law of culture: the bad will drive out the good; the result will be not just a homogeneous culture but a 'homogenized culture . . . that threatens to engulf everything in its spreading ooze' (27), dispersing the cream from the top and turning the American people into infantile masses. His conclusions are pessimistic to say the least: 'far from Mass Culture getting better, we will be lucky if it doesn't get worse' (29).

The analysis changes again as we move from the disillusioned ex-Trotskyism of Macdonald to the liberalism of Ernest van den Haag (1957), who suggests that mass culture is the inevitable outcome of mass society and mass production:

> The mass produced article need not aim low, but it must aim at an average of tastes. In satisfying all (or at least many) individual tastes in some respects, it violates each in other respects. For there are so far no average persons having average tastes. Averages are but statistical composites. A mass produced article, while reflecting nearly everybody's taste to some extent, is unlikely to embody anybody's taste fully. This is one source of the sense of violation which is rationalized vaguely in theories about deliberate debasement of taste (512).

He also suggests another reason: the temptations offered by mass culture to high culture. Two factors must be particularly tempting: (i) the financial rewards of mass culture, and (ii) the potentially enormous audience. He uses Dante as an illustration. Although Dante may have suffered religious and political pressures, he was not tempted to shape his work to make it appeal to an average of tastes. Had he been 'tempted to write for *Sports Illustrated*' or had he been asked 'to condense his work for *Reader's Digest*' or had he been given a contract 'to adapt it for the movies', would he have been able to maintain his aesthetic and moral standards? Dante was fortunate; his talent was never really tempted to stray from the true path of creativity: 'there were no alternatives to being as good a writer as his talent permitted' (521).

It is not so much that mass taste has deteriorated, van den Haag argues, but that mass taste has become more important to the cultural producers in Western societies. Like White, he notes the plurality of cultural texts and practices consumed in America. However, he also notes the way in which high culture and folk culture are absorbed into mass culture, and are consequently consumed as mass culture: 'it is not new nor

disastrous that few people read classics. It is new that so many people misread them' (528). He cannot help in the end declaring that mass culture is a drug which 'lessens people's capacity to experience life itself' (529). Mass culture is ultimately a sign of impoverishment. It marks the de-individualization of life: an endless search after what Freud calls 'substitute gratifications'.[7] The trouble with substitute gratifications, according to the mass culture critique, is that they shut out 'real gratifications' (532–5). This leads van den Haag to suggest that the consumption of mass culture is a form of repression; the empty texts and practices of mass culture are consumed to fill an emptiness within, which grows ever more empty the more the empty texts and practices of mass culture are consumed. The operation of this cycle of repression makes it increasingly impossible to experience 'real gratification'. The result is a nightmare in which the cultural 'masturbator' or the 'addict' of mass culture is trapped in a cycle of non-fulfilment, moving aimlessly between boredom and distraction:

> Though the bored person hungers for things to happen to him, the disheartening fact is that when they do he empties them of the very meaning he unconsciously yearns for by using them as distractions. In popular culture even the second coming would become just another 'barren' thrill to be watched on television till Milton Berle comes on (535).

Van den Haag differs from the 'cultural nostalgics', who use romanticized versions of the past to condemn the present, in his uncertainty about the past. He knows that 'popular culture impoverishes life without leading to contentment. But whether "the mass of men" felt better or worse without mass production techniques of which popular culture is an ineluctable part, we shall never know' (536). Edward Shils (1978) has none of van den Haag's uncertainty. Moreover, he knows that when van den Haag says that industry has impoverished life he is talking nonsense:

> The present pleasures of the working and lower middle class are not worthy of profound aesthetic, moral or intellectual esteem but they are surely not inferior to the villainous things which gave pleasure to their European ancestors from the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century (35).

Shils rejects completely

> the utterly erroneous idea that the twentieth century is a period of severe intellectual deterioration and that this alleged deterioration is a product of a mass culture. . . . Indeed, it would be far more correct to assert that mass culture is now less damaging to the lower classes than the dismal and harsh existence of earlier centuries had ever been (36).

As far as Shils can see the problem is not mass culture, but the response of intellectuals to mass culture. In similar fashion, D.W. Brogan (1978), whilst in agreement with much of Macdonald's argument, remains more optimistic. He believes that

Macdonald in being 'so grimly critical of the present America, is too kind to the past in America and to the past and present in Europe' (191). In this way, Macdonald's pessimism about the present is only sustained by his overly optimistic view of the past. In short, he 'exaggerates . . . the bad eminence of the United States' (193).

In 'The middle against both ends', Leslie Fiedler (1957), unlike most other contributors to the debate, claims that mass culture

> is a peculiarly American phenomenon. . . . I do not mean . . . that it is found only in the United States, but that wherever it is found, it comes first from us, and is still to be discovered in fully developed form only among us. Our experience along these lines is, in this sense, a preview for the rest of the world of what must follow the inevitable dissolution of the older aristocratic cultures (539).

For Fiedler, mass culture is popular culture that 'refuses to know its place'. As he explains,

> contemporary vulgar culture is brutal and disturbing: the quasi spontaneous expression of the uprooted and culturally dispossessed inhabitants of anonymous cities, contriving mythologies which reduce to manageable form the threat of science, the horror of unlimited war, the general spread of corruption in a world where the social bases of old loyalties and heroisms have long been destroyed (540).

Fiedler poses the question: What is wrong with American mass culture? He knows that for some critics, at home and abroad, the fact that it is American is enough reason to condemn it. But, for Fiedler, the inevitability of the American experience makes the argument meaningless; that is, unless those who support the argument are also against industrialization, mass education and democracy. He sees America 'in the midst of a strange two-front class war'. In the centre is 'the genteel middling mind', at the top is 'the ironical-aristocratic sensibility', and at the bottom is 'the brutal-populist mentality' (545). The attack on popular culture is a symptom of timidity and an expression of conformity in matters of culture: 'the fear of the vulgar is the obverse of the fear of excellence, and both are aspects of the fear of difference: symptoms of a drive for conformity on the level of the timid, sentimental, mindless-bodiless genteel' (547). The genteel middling mind wants cultural equality on its own terms. This is not the Leavisite demand for cultural deference, but an insistence on an end to cultural difference. Therefore, Fiedler sees American mass culture as hierarchical and pluralist, rather than homogenized and levelling. Moreover, he celebrates it as such.

Shils (1978) suggests a similar model – American culture is divided into three cultural 'classes', each embodying different versions of the cultural: '"superior" or "refined" culture' at the top, '"mediocre" culture' in the middle, and '"brutal" culture' at the bottom (206). Mass society has changed the cultural map, reducing the significance of 'superior or refined culture', and increasing the importance of both 'mediocre' and 'brutal' (209). However, Shils does not see this as a totally negative development: 'It is an indication of a crude aesthetic awakening in classes which

previously accepted what was handed down to them or who had practically no aesthetic expression and reception' (ibid.). Like Fiedler, Shils does not shy away from the claim that America is the home of mass culture. He calls America 'that most massive of all mass societies' (218). But he remains optimistic: 'As a matter of fact, the vitality, the individuality, which may rehabilitate our intellectual public will probably be the fruits of the liberation of powers and possibilities inherent in mass societies' (226). As Ross (1989) suggests, in Fiedler's essay, and in the work of other writers in the 1950s and early 1960s,

> the concept of 'class' makes a conditional return after its years in the intellectual wilderness. This time, however, class analysis returns not to draw attention to conflicts and contradictions, as had been the case in the thirties, but rather to serve a hegemonic moment in which a consensus was being established about the non antagonistic coexistence of different political conceptions of the world. Cultural classes could exist as long as they kept themselves to themselves (58).

Cultural choice and consumption become both the sign of class belonging and the mark of class difference. However, instead of class antagonism, there is only plurality of consumer choice within a general consensus of the dangers within and the dangers without. In short, the debate about mass culture had become the terrain on which to construct the Cold War ideology of containment. After all, as Melvin Tumin (1957) points out, 'America and Americans have available to them the resources, both of mind and matter, to build and support the finest culture the world has ever known' (550). The fact that this has not yet occurred does not dismay Tumin; for him it simply prompts the question: How do we make it happen? For the answer, he looks to American intellectuals, who 'never before have . . . been so well placed in situations where they can function as intellectuals' (ibid.), and through the debate on mass culture, to take the lead in helping to build the finest *popular culture* the world has ever known.

The culture of other people

It is easy to be critical of the 'culture and civilization' tradition's approach to popular culture. Given the recent developments in the field of cultural theory, it is almost enough to present a narrative of its approach to condemn it to populist disapproval. However, it must be remembered that from a historical point of view, the tradition's work is absolutely foundational to the project of the study of popular culture in British cultural studies. Furthermore, the impact of the tradition is difficult to overestimate: for more than a century it was undoubtedly the dominant paradigm in cultural analysis. Indeed, it could be argued that it still forms a kind of repressed 'common sense' in certain areas of British and American academic and non-academic life.