CHAPTER ONE

Passion, populism, politics

> If we were real, then what we saw on CNN was fiction; if it was real, then we must be tricks of the light.
> Jonathan Raban, *Hunting Mr Heartbreak*

In March 1981 John Hinckley shot President Reagan in order to impress the film star Jodie Foster. With this single act, politics and popular culture were linked inextricably. Hinckley's 'love' of Foster derived only from her screen image, but it was enough to inspire his attempt to assassinate the President of the United States of America. It might, of course, be reasonable to consign such acts to the realms of clinical psychology, to see them as having no real relevance to either politics or popular culture. But even if the Hinckley case is an extreme one, I still want to claim that it is an example of the intimacy in which politics and popular culture coexist. This relationship is founded on the passions that are generated both by politics and by popular culture.

This connection is not, of course, a simple one. It is not just a matter of popular culture 'reflecting' or 'causing' political thoughts and actions. Popular culture cannot be treated as a peg on which to hang glib generalizations about the state of the world or about popular feeling. Equally, popular culture does not make people think and act in particular ways. Oliver Stone's film *Natural Born Killers*, whatever the rhetoric and panic that it provoked, cannot be treated as the cause of acts of mindless violence.

Following the 1992 British General Election, *The Sun* newspaper declared that it had secured the Conservatives' victory. This view was widely shared. It fitted with many general preconceptions about the political power of the tabloid press and of the ambitions of its owners, men like Rupert Murdoch. But such tempting conclusions have proved hard to substantiate. Credible claims have been made for both sides, for those who said the *Sun* was decisive (Linton, 1996), and for those who said it made no difference (Curtice and Semetko, 1994). The argument between the two sides is couched in terms of separating 'cause' and 'effect', of distinguishing between the papers as reflections of popular opinion and the papers as shapers of it. But, I want to suggest, the problem may actually lie in posing the debate like this in the first place. Our relationship to popular culture and the popular press cannot be seen simply as a relationship of cause and effect. Instead, popular culture has to be understood as *part* of our politics.

This is not to deny the political importance of the popular press, but rather to understand it as part of the wider and more complex relationship we have with popular culture. This is to link popular culture directly to our histories and experiences. Reflecting on Elvis Presley's afterlife, Greil Marcus (1991: xiii–xiv) writes about how Elvis is still part of 'a great, common conversation . . . made out of songs, art works, books, movies, dreams; sometimes more than anything cultural noise, the glossolalia of money, advertisements, tabloid headlines, best sellers, urban legends, nightclub japes'. And in this conversation, suggests Marcus, people 'find themselves caught up in the adventure of remaking his [Elvis'] history, which is to say their own'. This, I think, better captures our relationship to popular culture than any crude notion of culture as cause or as reflection. Popular culture neither manipulates nor mirrors us; instead we live through and with it. We are not compelled to imitate it, any more than it has to imitate us. None the less our lives are bound up with it. This is what Iain Chambers (1986: 13) implies when he talks of popular culture as offering a 'democratic prospect for appropriating and transforming everyday life'. We might quibble over how 'democratic' the relationship is, how much power fans and audiences have compared to that wielded by the producers of popular culture, but Chambers' key point is about the way we live through that culture. This, it seems to me, is what Jon Savage (1991: 361) means when he records in his diary how it felt to hear punk music in the late 1970s:

> The Sex Pistols play for their lives. Rotten pours out all his resentments, his frustration, his claustrophobia into a cauldron of rage that turns this petty piece of theatre into something massive. . . . The audience is so close that the group are playing as much to fight them off, yet at the same time there is a strong bond: we feel what they feel. We're just as cornered.

Thirty years earlier, a similar account was given of seeing the film *The Blackboard Jungle*: 'I went three times to see that film. Then we'd be dancing coming home, in the middle of the road with all our friends, remembering the footsteps and everything' (Everett, 1986: 24).

If this view of popular culture is right, then there are important implications for politics. Let me suggest what these might be. Political thoughts and actions cannot be treated as somehow separate or discrete from popular culture. Marcus (1975: 204) writes of Elvis Presley as embodying 'America' and its political principles: 'Elvis takes his strength from the liberating arrogance, pride, and the claim to be unique that grow out of a rich and commonplace understanding of what "democracy" and "equality" are all about.' The connection between politics and popular emerges too in the way we choose our pleasures and judge our political masters, in the way the aesthetic blends into the ethical. Simon Frith (1996: 72) writes: 'not to like a record is not just a matter of taste; it is a matter of morality.' Criticism is often couched in ethical terms. In a review of Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter*, Pauline Kael wrote in the *New Yorker* that the film had 'no more moral intelligence than the Eastwood action pictures', and that it was a 'small-minded film'. The core of the problem lay in its hero, Michael, played by Robert De Niro. She complains that 'he is a hollow figure. There is never a moment when we feel, Oh My God, I know that man, I am that man' (Kael, 1980: 513, 518 and 519). This is as much a moral judgement as an aesthetic one. This is how the US critic Dave Marsh expressed his dislike of the rock band Oasis: 'Noel and Liam Gallagher seem, in the end, to be the kind of quasimoralists that Maggie and Ron were, content with their privileges because they think they earned them' (Marsh, 1996: 71). And just as moral judgements operate within culture, so cultural values operate in politics. We 'read' our politicians through their gestures and their faces, in the same way that we read performers on television. One of the key themes in this book is the way in which popular culture becomes – through the uses to which it is put and through the

judgements made of it – a form of political activity. An accompanying theme is the thought that contemporary politics is itself conducted through the language and the formats of popular culture.

These themes do not, however, exhaust the relationship between politics and popular culture. The same politicians who exploit popular culture are also engaged in shaping popular culture, and, in doing so, making possible some experiences and denying access to others. Copyright laws, trade policy, censorship, education policy, broadcasting regulations, all these things produce a popular culture that profoundly affects what is heard and seen. And this matters: it matters if people cannot enjoy certain films or books or musics because of the way they live through this culture. The political management of popular culture is, therefore, another key theme.

In an attempt to defend the claim that politics and popular culture are intimately linked, and to explore its implications, this book adopts two perspectives. The first is that of a student of politics, the point of view of someone who wants to understand political processes, political thoughts and political actions. The book is driven by the idea that, if we fail to take popular culture seriously, we impoverish our understanding of the conflicting currents and aspirations which fuel politics. But this book is not just about our understanding of politics. It is also about making sense of popular culture. This is the second perspective, and it derives from one particular question: how do political processes shape the form and content of popular culture? The pleasures and effects of popular culture do not derive straightforwardly from our visits to the cinema or club. Rather they are a consequence of the access we have to popular culture, the opportunity we have to discover its pleasures. And these are the results of political processes. The content and character of popular culture is a legacy of a complex chain of events, marked by the operation of the political institutions and political ideologies that organize them. My approach, and my focus on politics, is not intended to rule out other ways of understanding popular culture, rather it is to emphasize the fact that in thinking about popular culture, we need to recognize the political processes that forge it. They are crucial to determining the importance it has and the stories it tells.

Before looking in detail at the two perspectives, I want to say something about what is meant by 'popular culture'. In partic-

ular, I want to show that even here, in defining popular culture, political institutions and political judgements are inescapably involved.

Defining popular culture

There are countless ways of defining popular culture (see Storey, 1993: 6–17). Many focus upon the means of its production, distribution and consumption. Popular culture is a form of entertainment that is mass produced or is made available to large numbers of people (for example, on television). Availability may be measured by the opportunity to enjoy the product or by the absence of social barriers to enjoyment of it (no particular skills or knowledge are required; no particular status or class is barred from entry). The implicit contrast in this definition of popular culture is to be made with another form of culture: high culture, which is more exclusive, which is less accessible both practically and socially. Chambers (1986: 12) expands upon this distinction:

> Official culture, preserved in art galleries, museums and university courses, demands cultivated tastes and a formally imparted knowledge. It demands moments of attention that are separated from the run of daily life. Popular culture, meanwhile, mobilizes the tactile, the incidental, the expendable, the visceral. It does not involve an abstract aesthetic research amongst privileged objects of attention, but invokes mobile orders of sense, taste and desire.

The same contrast can be made between plays in the theatre and television soap operas, between the novels of John Grisham and those of Jeanette Winterson.

Although there is an appealing formality about defining popular culture in terms of the mechanisms that organize its production and consumption, it raises problems in its failure to say anything about the character of the culture itself. What this means is that a play that is seen by a few people off-Broadway or in London's Royal Court Theatre would not be popular culture in this setting, but were it to be transmitted on a major television channel at peak hours it would become popular culture. In the same way, a novel's status as popular culture is defined by its sales rather than its style. To avoid these problems, other definitions resort to

a more explicitly evaluative approach, focusing on style as much as sales. Here a work of opera, by virtue of the demands it makes upon listener and performer, is deemed to be 'high' culture, irrespective of the number of people who see or hear it. This definition of popular culture is established by references to styles and genres of cultural activity. Rock is popular culture, opera is not. Popular (or 'low') culture is defined by the fact that it appeals physically (as dance) rather than cerebrally (as contemplation). Other definitions again dwell upon the role and character of the audience, the way it is formed and addressed. This allows distinctions to be made within cultural forms, so that rock that is aimed at (or attracts) a small audience may not count as popular culture; or Beethoven's symphonies may be popular culture, while his string quartets are not; or Chopin may be popular culture while Stockhausen is not.

It will be immediately apparent that none of these attempts to define popular culture are altogether successful. In the first instance, they are not consistent with each other. For example, popular culture defined by its form (for example, pop music) can clash with the intuition that 'popular' also means 'liked by a large number of people'. Classical music can be 'popular' (for example, Pavarotti, Vanessa Mae or Michael Nyman); and some pop music may command a very small audience. Similar problems emerge in using evaluative criteria: can we make sensible and useful distinctions between the songs of Rosanne Cash, Elvis Costello, Ma Rainey, Stephen Sondheim and Benjamin Britten? Terms like 'complexity' or 'sophistication' are unlikely to get us far, since they can be applied, albeit in different ways, to music in any genre (see Middleton, 1990).

It is from within these confusions that the politics of 'popular culture' begin to emerge. Each of the competing accounts is underpinned by a set of political judgements which implicitly separate high from low culture, the elite from the popular. Each definition, by its nature, entails *selecting* particular cultural forms from amongst others, and making evaluations of their worth. It is not, of course, that such judgements can be avoided, only that they tend to be made implicitly, disguising their underlying values. All definitions of popular culture encode a set of political judgements, or, if acted upon, a set of political consequences. To describe something as popular culture is, for some, to suggest that it is less worthy than other forms of culture. And one implication of this will be

to devote fewer resources to it or accord it less status. Only 'high' culture is supposed to require state support, because it is deemed to be worthwhile but unable to sustain itself through the market. Equally, to call something popular culture may be, from another point of view, to see it as representing a democratic voice. So, for example, Stuart Hall (1981: 238) sees definitions of popular culture as being juxtaposed to some notion of the 'power bloc'. Popular culture is defined *against* dominant culture. These two different definitions of popular culture derive from different political positions. Their differences emerge in the way they identify 'the people' and in the way people relate to popular culture. This contingent view of popular culture chimes with Morag Shiach's (1989: 2) observation that the definition of popular culture is never settled, but is the product of a 'complex series of responses to historical developments within communications technologies, to increased literacy, or to changes in class relations'. If what we mean by popular culture is conditioned by history, by ideology and by institutions, and if these also affect people's relationship to popular culture, then we need to look more closely at how popular culture can engage with politics, and vice versa. We need, in short, to return to the two perspectives that I referred to earlier.

Perspective 1: from popular culture to politics

What I want to do here is to sketch briefly the ways in which popular culture seems to engage with politics, the way its pleasures are linked to political thoughts and actions. Think of the way we respond to favourite films or songs or television programmes: the way we laugh and cry, dance and dream. Popular culture makes us feel things, allows us to experience sensations, that are both familiar and novel. It does not simply echo our state of mind, it moves us. Simon Frith (1988a: 123) once wrote: 'Pop songs do not "reflect" emotions . . . but give people romantic terms in which to articulate their emotions.' And in articulating emotions, popular culture links us into a wider world. Part of the pleasure of soap operas is their endless playing out of everyday moral dilemmas, posing questions and suggesting answers to our worries about what we should do. Here is the voice of a woman explaining the pleasure of watching TV soaps: 'I go round my mate's and she'll

say, "Did you watch *Coronation Street* last night? What about so and so?" . . . We always sit down and it's "Do you think she's right last night, what she's done?" Or, "I wouldn't have done that," or "Wasn't she a cow to him?" ' (Morley, 1986: 156). The vicarious thrill of seeing people behaving badly is animated by our sense of what is right and our understanding of the urge to do wrong. These tensions are not just a matter of private morality; they also extend into our public lives. This, for example, is how some writers have understood the success of *film noir* of the 1940s. Films like *Double Indemnity* touched upon the anxieties that confronted a post-war world. George Lipsitz (1982: 177) argues that 'The popularity of the film noir scenario in postwar America represents more than a commercial trend or an artistic cliché. In its portrayal of a frustrated search for community, film noir addressed the central political issues of American life in the wake of World War II.' Often this anxiety focused, in such films as *The Lady from Shanghai*, on male fears about the new social mobility enjoyed by women as a consequence of wartime demands (Chambers, 1986: 101). That popular culture can articulate such thoughts is not merely a matter of academic interest. It can have direct, political consequences. In nineteenth-century France the café singer Thérèsa was immensely popular, but her popularity was seen as subversive and threatening. 'People believed', writes T. J. Clark (1984: 227), 'that Thérèsa posed some sort of threat to the propertied order, and certainly the empire appeared to agree with them. It policed her every line and phrase, and its officers made no secret of the fact that they considered the café-concert a public nuisance.'

Popular culture's ability to produce and articulate feelings can become the basis of an identity, and that identity can be the source of political thought and action. We know who we are through the feelings and responses we have, and who we are shapes our expectations and our preferences. This sort of argument is advanced by Frith and Horne (1987: 16), who begin by claiming that identity is a founding aspect of politics: 'People's sense of themselves has always come from the use of images and symbols (signs of nation, class and sexuality, for example). How else do politics and religion, and art itself work?' And they go on to argue that identity is itself a product of our encounters with popular culture: 'We become who we are – in terms of taste and style and political interest and sexual preference – through a whole series of responses to people and images, identifying with some, distinguishing ourselves from others,

and through the interplay of these decisions with our material circumstances (as blacks or whites, males or females, workers or non-workers)' (Frith and Horne, 1987: 16). Behind this argument is the thought that, if politics is the site within which competing claims are voiced and competing interests are managed, there is an important question to be addressed: why do people make such claims or see themselves as having those interests? The answer is that they are the consequence of us seeing ourselves as being certain sorts of people, as having an identity, which in turn establishes our claim upon the political order. These identities emerge in relation to the ways in which nations are defined in their rituals and pageants, in their sporting contests, in their daily newspapers. The press in particular is a crucial actor: in the divisions that get drawn between 'us' and 'them', whether within countries or between countries. There is an endless attempt to locate people in order to tell stories about them and to provide explanations for their behaviour.

The constant stream of representations in popular culture only paints part of the picture. It matters what people do with the barrage of images and identities. This is revealed in people's passionate investment in popular culture (representations matter little if no one cares about them). The sports fan is perhaps the most obvious example. Consider this description of Italian football fans:

> The AC Roma supporters sang in the stadium for five hours before the kick off. After defeat, fires lit up all around the ground in the balmy dusk. A riot? No, it was the fans burning every flag, scarf and hat they had, in complete silence: an extraordinary ritual. In the streets outside, true, some threw bottles at the English. But many more – grown men – wept on their knees in gutters. (Quoted in Redhead, 1986: 109)

This kind of passionate involvement can take on political significance. In 1990, the politician Norman Tebbit suggested the introduction of a 'nationality test'. To tell whether someone was truly British you had to see whom they supported in international sporting contests. Recalling a visit to a match between England and the West Indies at Lord's, the home of English cricket, Mike Marqusee (1994: 227) writes:

> All of us would have disgracefully failed Norman Tebbit's cricket test. Alex had been born in Jamaica, so I suppose he had an excuse,

> but all five of the boys had spent their entire lives in north London. They did not follow cricket with any real zeal, but they had made the West Indian side their own. For them, the West Indies' combination of raw power and refined skills served as a magisterial reply to a racist society. Whatever they may have liked to think, they were not West Indians. They were not like their parents. Their loyalty and pride in the West Indian side was a political choice.

Popular culture can, in the way it offers forms of identity, become engaged with politics, in particular with the politics of citizenship, the right to belong and to be recognized.

Popular culture can also become a form of resistance. It can provide a form of defiance, a weapon with which to deny power. For the writer Greil Marcus (1989a: 90), the Sex Pistols' last performance (before they reformed in 1996) was a living embodiment of just such a political gesture: 'Walking the aisles of the Winterland as the Sex Pistols played, I felt a confidence and a lust that were altogether new. Thirty-two years had not taught me what I learned that night: when you're pushed, push back; when a shove negates your existence, negate the shove.' It is exactly this role, as a source of political resistance, that has marked popular culture throughout history. Tracing this tradition, John Scott (1990: 37–8) talks of the way that popular culture provides a 'hidden transcript' in which is written 'the anger and reciprocal aggression denied by the presence of domination'. The hidden transcript can be found in 'rumor, gossip, folktales, jokes, songs, rituals, codes, and euphemism – a good part of the folk culture of subordinate groups' (Scott, 1990: 19). Such culture becomes part of a political struggle to establish a particular view of the world, one which challenges the conventions of the dominant common sense. Simon Schama (1989: 181) reports on just such a struggle during the French Revolution, when the competing factions fought to tell their story:

> . . . it was unbound literature – almanacs and the posting of notices and placards – that would have increasingly connected the common people of the French towns with the world of public events. Every morning in Paris forty bill stickers would paste the city with news of battles won or lost; edicts of the King and the government; public festivities to mark some auspicious event; timely indications about the transport of ordure or the removal of graves. At moments of crisis they would be defaced or (illegally) supplanted by notices parodying government orders or pillorying ministers. And the exuberance of their visual broadcasting was matched by the flam-

> boyance of the oral world of the Parisian, tuned as it was to a whole universe of songs. . . . Songs were sold by strolling vendors on the boulevards, bridges and quais and were sung at the cafés, their themes spanning a whole universe from the predictable airs of songs of courtship, seduction and rejection, to others that caroled the sons of Liberty in America, the profligacy of the court, the impotence of the King and the naughtiness of the Queen.

Such acts of political resistance are commonly played out within popular culture, in the way figures of authority are mocked in satire and comedy – from *The Simpsons* to *Spitting Image*. They are not just statements or suppressed emotions, they are a kind of action, although as Scott (1990: 191) insists, we need to think of the hidden transcript 'as a condition of practical resistance rather than a substitute for it'.

Popular culture's ability to focus passion and to express defiance also allows it to become a form of political management. This opportunity can, of course, be used to malign and benign effect, just as the identities constructed through popular culture can be liberating or oppressive. We have only to recall the propaganda machines of Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia to remember the ways in which the machinery of culture can be deployed to legitimate a political order and to orchestrate popular sentiment. And some would argue that the same insidious forces are still at work in the popular culture of liberal democratic states of the West (Harker, 1980). Both by acts of censorship as well as by acts of propaganda, the state tries to make popular culture a device for securing deference and marginalizing dissent. What the state is doing is drawing upon culture's ability to move us. Equally, of course, such effects can be put to better use by encouraging compassion and charity. One of the most famous examples of this was Live Aid in 1985. Bob Geldof used popular culture to organize a spirit of universal humanitarianism. Geldof was able to employ sounds and images to prick our collective conscience. There have been other examples of such use of popular culture (George Harrison's Concert for Bangladesh, for instance), but Live Aid was the biggest. Here was a pop star acting as a global statesman, not speaking for 'youth', but for 'us' all. Here was someone using the full array of media organizations and technologies to create an international audience. But these innovations should not obscure the fact that Geldof was also doing what politicians and pop stars have always tried to do: to create a following, to put together a

'people' (to create an identity) and to give them a focus for their passion. And it is at this point that the other perspective on the politics of popular culture emerges, when popular culture becomes the object of politics, rather than its subject.

In this section, I have looked at some of the ways in which the pleasures of popular culture become engaged with politics – through the feelings it articulates, the identities it offers, the passions it elicits and in the responses it prompts. These encounters with politics do not, however, describe an inevitable state of affairs. Popular culture does not always provide a source of defiance or whatever. Not every film 'works', and the way film moves us is different from the way music or television affects us. Many other factors come into play, from the text to the context, from the audience to the industry. One of the key elements is the way popular culture is organized, because it is this that shapes what is enjoyed and how it is enjoyed. This thought is crucial to the argument of this book, and I shall return to it towards the end of this chapter. But for the moment, I want to turn attention to the other perspective that links politics to popular culture.

Perspective 2: from politics to popular culture

It is more than an interesting coincidence that film stars or media moguls become political leaders. Ronald Reagan and Silvio Berlusconi are not exceptions. They are part of a general rule which recognizes that popular culture constitutes part of the way we communicate with each other, and that political communication depends upon symbols and gestures as much as on words and sentences. When South American chat-show hosts move – apparently effortlessly – from the studio to the hustings, or when the musician and actor Ruben Blades becomes a leading contender for the Panamanian presidency, we are witnessing a logic that inhabits both popular culture and politics. These are people who are expert in modern forms of communication, but they are also expert in 'representing' the people. Politicians increasingly borrow the techniques and skills of popular entertainment to communicate their message or promote their image. Boris Yeltsin solicited a parade of celebrities in his 1996 presidential election campaign in an attempt to acquire a starry glister; Bill Clinton not

only played the saxophone on MTV, but he also studied carefully the ways in which television performers establish a rapport with their audience, and how they manage the emotions on display. Every party now deploys the language of the advertising executive and the skills of the pop video maker in their election campaigns. In Britain, this symbiosis was most dramatically represented in the 1987 Party Election Broadcast for Neil Kinnock, made by the director of *Chariots of Fire*, Hugh Hudson. The techniques of popular film and political image were captured in a series of sentimental memories, soft-focus shots and warm endorsements. The point was to sell Neil Kinnock, to sell his sensitivity and his warmth, just as videos and advertisements sell other products. As politicians desperately try to create a constituency for their parties and policies, they find themselves drawn ever closer to popular culture.

What popular culture represents is a mastery of popularity. The examples above are not isolated ones, but, as I have suggested, part of a pervasive logic. It is a logic that derives from a shared desire to generate popularity and to claim representation. As Marcus (1993: 293) once observed:

> Ronald Reagan has never said a public word about Prince or Madonna, only had Michael Jackson to the White House and appropriated Bruce Springsteen for a campaign speech. But by those acts and thousands like them, he validated the process by which stars are validated. He became bigger; so, for the moment, did they. The difference is that he is not in it for the moment.

The fact that we are seeing a new intimacy in the connection between politics and popular culture should not blind us to the realization that this link was always latent. Its current prominence tells us only that now it is an acknowledged fact, where before it was partially obscured by formal codes and artificial distinctions. British MPs resisted for years the televising of Parliament even as they increasingly exploited that same medium – in photo-opportunities and interviews – for their immediate political gain. Politicians have always sought popularity, and in their search they have always allied themselves with the cultural representations of 'the popular'. From the pre-war exploits of Governor Huey P. Long to Reagan's courtship of film stars and musicians, US politicians have made full use of the possibilities for self-promotion afforded by popular culture. Even the superficially reticent British have done

the same. Over thirty years ago, Prime Minister Harold Wilson awarded the Beatles the MBE (Member of the British Empire). Nowadays pop stars become politicians, and politicians court pop stars. Together they exploit popular culture's ability to combine passion, politics and popularity.

Again, as with the first perspective, my claim is not that politics is inevitably linked to popular culture. Indeed, my argument is the same as before. The connection depends on the conditions and the context, on the type of popular culture and the type of political system. Once more, to understand the relationship between politics and popular culture we have to understand the ideas and institutions that organize them both. The connection does not just 'happen'; we have to see it as being created and administered. If we do not, the two perspectives – from popular culture to politics, from politics to popular culture – will seem to come together in a vague postmodern haze in which everyone is in the same business. As Brian Eno (1996: 251) wryly records in his diary: 'Now that artists, comedians, writers, poets, architects, newsreaders, religious leaders, politicians, industrialists, fashion designers and scientists are all acting like pop stars, there's nothing left for pop stars to do but award them all prizes.' This elision is seen as the consequence of the erosion of rigid hierarchies and of universal principles, of their replacement by amorphous networks and anonymous market forces. Our world is one in which, it seems, all choices – moral, political, aesthetic – are essentially consumer, lifestyle choices, arbitrated by the laws of supply and demand. This is the logic of populism, in politics and in culture. The only good policies, the only successful parties or politicians, are those that give the people what they want. The only test of cultural merit is to be found at the box office, or in the ratings or in the charts.

Both these varieties of populism – whether political or cultural – have a superficial appeal; they appear to guarantee neutrality and legitimacy. The popular choice is the democratic choice. It is not imposed; it is the product of free individuals responding to their preferences. Any alternative to this involves acts of judgement and interference, exercises of power that require the introduction of partial values and the prosecution of particular interests. But this is a false distinction. In reality, populism is itself as much the product of political judgements and interests as are imposed choices. The market is not a neutral instrument, it is a political arrangement. And in understanding the relationship of politics

and popular culture, we need to be on guard against the easy option that 'populism' represents. It oversimplifies the ways in which popular culture takes on political significance, or the ways in which politics engages with popular culture. The relationship is itself dependent on political ideologies and institutions. I want, therefore, to spell out the problems of populism here, and to draw out the implications that these criticisms have for the connection between politics and popular culture.

Politics against populism

The blending of politics and popular culture runs the risk of seeing politicians as simply representing the people, and popular culture as being just a form of popular expression. I want to reject both of these views. Certainly, there is a strong desire on the part of the political order to claim that it represents the people, and for politicians to claim that they speak for the people. Running parallel to this political populism is a cultural populism, one that allows broadcasters, artists, cultural analysts and others to claim that popular culture expresses the wishes and desires of the people. Both political and cultural populism are, however, highly suspect ideas, at least in their unqualified form.

With the possible exception of fundamentalist regimes, which draw their legitimation from divine revelation, all forms of government – whether dictatorial or democratic, capitalist or communist – derive their authority from 'the people'. Their claim to rule is validated by the thought that they are 'the voice of the people' (and that this claim has itself been tested by elections and other constitutional devices). But in acknowledging this legitimating rhetoric, we cannot afford to forget that 'the people' are as much a rhetorical as a political fact. Politics is in large part an attempt to secure pre-eminence for one version of the people over another, to define the people in a way that serves a particular set of interests or practices. (Different electoral systems can produce quite different versions of the 'people's will'.) To lay claim to 'the people', argues Ernesto Laclau (1977: 167–73), is to engage in a political struggle in an attempt to secure victory for a dominant class. There is no final source of authority; there is no popular oracle. The 'people' are the product of politics, not its origin.

In achieving dominance, populist rhetoric adopts a variety of codes and genres. It can, for example, appeal to past myths or future fears; and it can dress them in different styles – it can be hectoring or homely, grandiose or folksy. But what each is intended to do is to link its audience to a vision which in turn legitimates a particular course of action. This is, it needs to be stressed, a creative process. First, there is the question of who is to be included in the idea of the people; and, secondly, there is the question of what they want. The people do not have a 'voice'; they are given one by opinion pollsters, commentators, journalists, politicians, interest groups. The 'people' are created through the ways in which they are represented and spoken for. The people are made; they do not just exist.

Popular culture against populism

The same kind of scepticism has to be applied to popular culture. Just as we may doubt the politician's claim to speak for the people, so we need to be equally wary of suggestions that popular culture speaks for the people. There is a tradition of writing about popular culture that links it directly to its 'times'. So sixties music and films ('Streetfighting Man', *Easy Rider*) stand for the political and social upheaval of those years, as punk expressed the economic downturn of the late seventies. Such readings tend to be highly selective, depending, first, upon reading the culture in a particular way (ignoring, for example, the immense popularity of *The Sound of Music* [Harker, 1992]); and, secondly, upon highlighting a particular set of experiences and lives (punk, after all, was confined to relatively small metropolitan social networks). What gets lost is all the other forms of popular culture and their followers. What is also missing is the way in which both the audiences and the culture emerge from the complex network of bureaucracies and agencies of the culture industries. The popular press may pretend that it speaks for the people, but its values may not be shared by its readers.

There is, though, another form of cultural populism, one which recognizes the intervening power of the industry, but which invests audiences with the capacity to reinterpret and subvert its messages. Here the culture *acquires* political significance through

the interpretations put upon it. This gives the audience power over the product and allows them to recruit the culture to their side in the political battle. It is this approach which makes it possible to find subversive social comment in *Baywatch* or radicalism in the Rambo films or authentic anger in Snoop Doggy Dogg. But in recognizing that cultural products are available to a number of different interpretations, there is a danger of adopting a populism which allows all popular culture to be treated as a form of political resistance. It is to assume that everywhere, in all acts of cultural consumption, subversive interpretations are being imposed which somehow empower audiences. To take this view is to ignore the differences between works of popular culture; it is to treat them as blank screens onto which any idea can be written. But as Jim McGuigan (1992) insists, this is to overlook the need for judgement and discrimination in understanding popular culture, the need to select between accuracy and distortion, the genuine and the phony. Some popular culture is better than others – as we acknowledge every time we choose a video or a film, every time we switch channels. It may be hard to explain our choice, but we do it, and someone – the television producer, the film distributor and many others – does it for us, every day. Such decisions cannot be avoided. The real question is who should take them and how. Whatever pleasures lie in the books of Jeffrey Archer, they hardly constitute the basis for a radical critique of capitalism, and there are better writers who could sell in the same quantity under a different publishing system. The populist reading of popular culture, just like the populist reading of politics, needs to be replaced by an approach which understands popular culture in terms of the institutions that create it and the political ideologies that inform it.

Beyond populism

What these criticisms of populism reveal is that there is another dimension to the relationship between politics and popular culture. It emerges in the way political institutions and ideas materially affect the character, content, production and consumption of popular culture. This is most evident in the practice of censorship or of propaganda, where the state (through its various agencies –

especially broadcasters) denies access to popular culture for fear of its effects, or where it uses popular culture as propaganda in order to maintain its authority and social order generally. But this relationship between the political order and popular culture is also present in a more subtle guise. It is there in the way the state creates the conditions under which popular culture is produced and distributed. The state's role in broadcasting, education and industrial policy, among other areas, establishes the conditions, regulations and opportunities which help define what kind of popular culture is available in any country or region. In other words, to understand popular culture is to understand the conditions of its production. It is not enough to look only at the text or its audience; we need also to look at the way popular culture is organized and made available.

Equally, a state's constitutional and institutional structures can also affect the ways in which popular culture becomes incorporated into political practice. Where parties control political career paths, by the distribution of political patronage, the opportunities offered by media exposure are less useful. But where parties are weak, the media become crucial agents. This helps to explain the greater prominence attached to the media in the USA; it also helps to explain why, as formal party structures crumble, British politicians make ever greater use of media access. It also explains the media-oriented political strategies of maverick campaigners like Ross Perot or James Goldsmith (leader of the Referendum Party in Britain). In the same way, social movements are more likely to campaign through mass media than established interest groups. Put differently control of media power will acquire greater political significance in some regimes, and not in others. Berlusconi's rise in Italy was a product not simply of his media empire, but of the Italian political system itself. A similar explanation is needed for why people in showbusiness more easily rise to the top in politics in some countries than in others. Some systems reward populism; others practise elitism.

The ability to claim to represent the people does not simply exist as a fact of life for either performers or politicians. They both want to be popular, but what this means and how it is achieved depend on many factors. Representatives have to be legitimated, they have to be able to justify the claim to speak for their constituents or their country. To say that you speak for the people, that you are a true representative, is not automatically established by

the political system; or, rather, even constitutionally validated representation is constantly challenged from within and from outside. Think of that moment when President Ceauşescu of Romania, head of a powerful authoritarian regime, was drowned out by the crowd in the square below. The revolution had begun; he could no longer even pretend to speak for the people. This was just another example of a politics in which there are competing claims about who or what constitutes the people. And this battle is waged around the symbolic representations of the people, around the devices that enable the people to be constituted in one form rather than another.

An obvious example of this constant struggle arises in the familiar arguments over popular culture itself. They are to be heard in the sound of politicians, priests and others lamenting the malign effects of popular culture on the minds and morals of those who fall under its spell. Whether it is *Neighbours* or raves, whether *Reservoir Dogs* or Roald Dahl, the argument is over what the public should see and hear, and how these things may change or influence them. The same questions inhabit debates about public funding of the arts, or about what children should be taught in school.

The arguments – about whether a particular piece of popular culture is suitable for public consumption – are not just about matters of 'taste' or about viewing figures or opinion polls. They are founded on judgements about what is to be admired or decried in popular culture, and they emerge from the different ways (and the different contexts) in which popular culture works. All of the arguments are the product of competing ideologies and competing interests, and their consequences are measured in the opportunities people have to engage with culture (and to benefit or suffer from it).

Passionate interests

The argument that we have sketched so far suggests that there is more to the link between politics and popular culture than their occasional borrowings and battles. There is an underlying logic which ropes them together. This logic springs from the way in which notions of representation, the people, popularity and identity are shared between them. Within and between politics and

popular culture, there is a constant struggle to articulate these identities, a battle that is, in one incarnation, fought over the claim to 'represent' those competing identities. The authority to speak for the people is not simply given by a set of formal political rules. It has to be established. And the ability to do this depends on the ways in which political actors can be said to represent the people, a claim that in turn rests upon the way 'the people' are themselves defined and their 'representatives' connected to them.

This process takes place within a wider context in which political interests and values shape popular culture, just as the political economy of popular culture determines the political possibilities within that culture. The political shaping of popular culture is a matter of both institutions and ideas. It is to be observed in the organizations – transnational, national and regional – that order the production and consumption of popular culture. It is also to be observed in the judgements and values that underlie decisions about how organizing principles are to be applied, as well as in the way popular culture is used politically. But to argue for this approach to understanding the relationship is to raise as many questions as are answered – questions about the role of identity in politics, about the relationship between 'material' interests and perceptions, about how different forms of popular culture construct (or fail to construct) different senses of self, about the conditions under which popular culture operates. Accounts of politics may often fail to explain or analyse the passions and pleasures that make sense of popularity and which underlie political action, but still we need to find a way of introducing such factors. Equally, while cultural studies may tell us about how the popular works, we need to supplement this with a sense of how political processes shape culture and our enjoyment of it. This book is an attempt to fill both these gaps.

Whatever next . . .

The rest of *Politics and Popular Culture* has a fairly straightforward structure. It divides into three parts. The first develops further the two perspectives (from popular culture to politics, from politics to popular culture) that I discussed earlier. Chapter 2 looks at the ways in which politics has been linked to popular culture, and

examines the claims that have been made for the political power of popular culture. The chapter ends with a brief discussion of what it means to talk of the 'politics' of popular culture. Chapter 3 turns attention to the ways in which conventional politics has increasingly drawn upon popular culture in order to promote its various causes. It focuses on 'dangers' associated with the packaging of politics. I argue that these are greatly exaggerated, but I also suggest that we need to recognize politics' dependence upon popular culture, and to judge it accordingly.

The second part of the book takes up the issue of the political management of popular culture. Central to this is the idea of the globalization of popular culture. Part II divides into three chapters, each of which deals with different levels in the political economy of popular culture: the transnational (chapter 4), the national (chapter 5) and the regional/local (chapter 6). In each, I look at the ways in which states organize popular culture and the effect this has upon that culture's own politics. It is important to see how political processes and political ideologies shape the form and content of popular culture. As such, this part constitutes an extended critique of some claims about the power and pervasiveness of globalization.

The final part addresses three key issues that underlie all discussion of the relationship between politics and popular culture. Chapter 7 examines the claims of cultural accounts of politics. There are, after all, several entirely respectable political science paradigms which regard culture as either peripheral, irrelevant or subservient. An argument for the political importance of popular culture must, therefore, establish some grounds for treating culture as a significant variable. In making the case for culture's explanatory role, I argue that we need also to think about the different political accounts that can be given of culture. Chapter 8 takes up this question, and looks at the political ideas that underpin competing understandings of popular culture. This leads to a chapter in which I look at the way in which political judgement is organized into the censorship and selection of popular culture. The concluding chapter argues that politics is deeply implicated in the way we choose and enjoy popular culture. In short, this book is an attempt to persuade political scientists to take popular culture seriously; and to persuade fans of popular culture of the importance of politics to their pleasures and passions (and maybe to make a little more sense of the bit of John Hinckley that lurks in all of us).