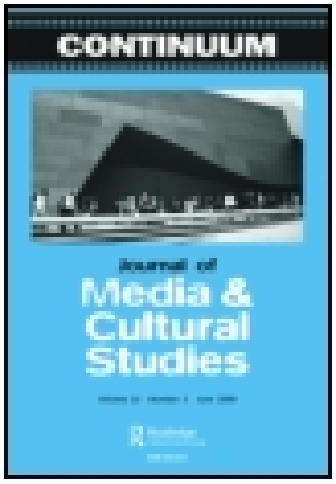

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TV: Re-situating the popular in the people

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TV: RE-SITUATING THE POPULAR IN THE PEOPLE

Popularity is only a problem if we believe that we live in a heterogeneous society and if we reject universalistic theories that people are all the same really. I take as my base assumptions first that late capitalist societies are composed of a huge variety of social groups and subcultures, all held together in a network of social relations in which the most significant factor is the differential distribution of power, and second that universal notions of human nature do not get us very far, and have all too frequently been used to direct our thinking along paths that are theoretically sterile and politically reprehensible. Psychology, aesthetics and ethics have all been misused in this way.

Assumptions that I reject, then, are that the capitalist cultural industries produce an apparent variety of products whose variety is finally illusory for they all promote the same capitalist ideology. Their skill in sugar coating the pill is so great that the people are not aware of the ideological practice in which they are engaging as they consume and enjoy the cultural commodity. The consequent belief that any one text conveys the same message to all people is an equally widely held and equally misleading fallacy. A consequential assumption, that I reject equally firmly, is that people are, in Stuart Hall's phrase, 'cultural dopes'.[1] The people are not a passive, helpless mass incapable of discrimination and thus at the economic, cultural and political mercy of the barons of the industry. Equally I reject the assumption that all that different people and different social groups have in common is baseness, so that art that appeals to many can only do so by appealing to what humans call 'the animal instincts'. The lowest common denominator may be a useful concept in arithmetic, but in the study of popularity its only possible value is to expose the prejudices of those who use it.

More modern Marxist thinking rejects the notion of a singular or monovocal capitalist ideology in favour of a multiplicity of ideologies that speak capi-

talism in a variety of ways for a variety of capitalist subjects. Their unity in speaking capitalism is fragmented by the plurality of accents in which they speak it. Such a view posits a multiplicity of points of resistance or accommodations whose only unity lies in the fact of their resistance or accommodation, but not in the form it may take.

This is a model that has far greater explanatory power in late capitalism and is one that grants some power to 'the people'. Despite the homogenising force of the dominant ideology, the subordinate classes in capitalism have retained a remarkable diversity of class identities, and this has required capitalism to produce an equivalent variety of voices. The diversity of capitalist voices is evidence of the comparative intransigence of the subordinate.

Any discussion of popularity must account for opposing forces within it. The definition that serves the interests of the producers and distributors of the cultural commodity within the financial economy is one of head counting, often with some demographic sophistication so that heads of a particular socio-economic class, age group, gender or other classification can be collected, counted and then 'sold' to an advertiser. The greater the head count, the greater the popularity. Opposed to this is the notion that popular means 'of the people' and that popularity springs from, and serves the interests of, the people amongst whom it is popular. Its meanings and pleasures circulate within a cultural economy which is relatively autonomous from the financial. Popularity is here a measure of a cultural form's ability to serve the desires of its customers. In so far as the people occupy different social situations from the producers, their interests must necessarily differ from and often conflict with, the interests of the producers.

The term 'the people' has romantic connotations which must not be allowed to lead us into an idealised notion of the people as an oppositional force whose culture and social experience are in some way authentic. We need to think rather of the people as a multiple concept, a huge variety of social groups accommodating themselves with, or opposing themselves to, the dominant value system in a variety of ways. In so far as 'the people' is a concept with any validity at all, it should be seen as an alliance of formations which are constantly shifting and relatively transient. It is neither a unified nor a stable concept, but one whose terms are constantly under reformulation in a dialectic relationship with the dominant classes. In the cultural domain, then, popular art is an ephemeral, multifarious concept based upon multiple relationships with the dominant ideology.

In the cultural domain, the term 'people' refers to social groups that are relatively powerless and addressed as consumers, but who have cultural forms and interests of their own that differ from, and often conflict with, those of the producers of cultural commodities. The autonomy of these groups from the dominant is only relative, and never total, but it derives from their marginalised and repressed histories that have intransigently resisted incorpora-

tion, and have retained material, as well as ideological, differences. For some groups these differences may be small and the conflicts muted, but for others the gap is enormous. For a cultural commodity to be popular then, it must be able to meet the various interests of the people amongst whom it is popular as well as the interests of its producers.

The multiplicity and contradictory value of these interests does not mean that they cannot be met in the one commodity: they can, though only because the cultural commodity circulates in different though simultaneous economies, which we may call the financial and the cultural.

We need to look in a little more detail at the separate, though related, workings of these two economies, the financial and the cultural. The financial economy offers two modes of circulation for cultural commodites: in the first, the producers of a program sell it to distributors: the program is a straightforward material commodity. In the next economy, the program-as-commodity changes role and it becomes a producer. And the new commodity that it produces is an audience which is sold to advertisers or sponsors.

A classic example of the interdependence of these two financial 'sub-economies' and the possibility of controlling them is provided by *Hill Street Blues*. MTM produce the series and sell it for distribution to CBS. CBS sell its audience (a higher socio-economic group of both genders than most TV audiences) to Mercedes Benz who sponsor the series. The show rates respectably, but not spectacularly. MTM could, if they wished, modify the format and content of the series to increase the size of the audience in the second economy. But such an increase would be in a lower socio-economic group, and this is not a commodity (audience-as-commodity) that Mercedes Benz wish to buy. So the show stays as it is, one of the few on American TV that has a strong class basis, though, noticeably little class conflict. Furillo and Davenport, those embodiments of middle class angst, care and suffer for their team of working class cops. The program is built around the yuppie view of class, social conscience and moral responsibility. These are the basis of the meanings and pleasures that the program offers in the third economy.

The move to this economy, the cultural one, involves yet another role shift from commodity to producer. As the move from the first to the second in the financial economy shifted the program itself from the role of commodity to that of producer, so the move to the cultural involves the audience in a role-shift in which it also changes from being a commodity to being a producer: in this case a producer of meanings and pleasures. The gap between the cultural and the financial economies is wide enough to grant the cultural economy considerable autonomy, but not too wide to be bridgeable. The producers and distributors of a program can exert some, if limited, influence over who watches and some, though limited influence over the meanings and pleasures that the audiences (and we must shift to the plural in the cultural economy) may produce from it. The yuppie target audience of *Hill Street Blues* is far

from its only audience and the variety of audiences will presumably produce a variety of pleasures and meanings. *Dallas* not only tops the ratings in the USA and thus must gain a wide diversity of American audiences, it is also widely exported and arguably has the largest range of audiences of any fictional TV program. Ien Ang[2] for example, found a Dutch Marxist and a feminist who were able to find pleasures in the program by finding in its excess of sexism and capitalism critiques of those systems that it was apparently celebrating. Similarly, Katz and Liebes[3] found that members of a Jewish kibbutz were clear that the money of the Ewings did not bring them happiness, whereas members of a rural North African co-operative were equally clear that their wealth gave them an easy life. Russian Jews, newly arrived in Israel, read the program as an intentional self-criticism of the American way of life - a sort of capitalist confessional. Indeed, typically, each of Katz and Liebes' fifty different ethnic viewing groups was able to separate their pleasures in, and meanings of, *Dallas* from the American capitalist ideology that aparently informs the program so centrally. Buying the programme does not mean buying into the ideology.

The freedom of audiences as producers in the cultural economy is considerable. This is partly due to the absence of any direct sign of their (subordinate) role in the financial economy which liberates them from its constraints - there is no exchange of money at the point of sale/consumption, and no direct relationship between the price paid and the amount consumed, people can consume as much as they wish and what they wish, without the restriction of what they are able to afford. Meanings do not circulate in the cultural economy in the way that wealth does in the financial. They are harder to possess (and thus to exclude others from possessing), they are harder to control because the production of meaning and pleasure is not the same as the production of the cultural commodity, or of other goods, for in the cultural economy the role of consumer does not exist as the end point of a linear economic transaction. Meanings and pleasures circulate within it without any real distinction between producers and consumers.

In the financial economy consumption is clearly separate from production and the economic relations that bind them are comparatively clear and available for analysis. But the cultural economy does not work in the same way. Its commodities, let us call them texts, are not containers or conveyors of meaning and pleasure, but rather *provokers* of meaning and pleasure. The production of meaning/pleasure is finally the responsibility of the consumer: this is not to say that the material producers/distributors do not attempt to make and sell meaning/pleasure: of course they do, but their failure rate is enormous. Twelve out of thirteen records fail to make a profit, TV series are axed by the dozen, expensive films sink rapidly into red figures (*Raise the Titanic* is an ironic example - it nearly sunk the Lew Grade empire).

This is one reason why the cultural industries produce what Garnham[4] calls 'repertoires' of products, they cannot predict which of their commodities will be chosen by which sectors of the market to be the provoker of meanings/pleasures that serve *their* interests as well as those of the producers. Because the production of meaning/pleasure occurs in the consumption as well as the production of the cultural commodity the notion of production takes on a new dimension that delegates it away from the owners of capital.

Cultural capital, despite Bourdieu's[5] productive metaphor does not circulate in the same way as economic capital. Hobson's[6] viewers of *Crossroads*, for example were vehement that the program was theirs, it was their cultural capital. And they made it theirs by the pleasures and meanings they produced from it, that articulated their concerns and identities. There is a popular cultural capital in a way that there is no popular economic capital, and thus Bourdieu's institutionally validated cultural capital of the bourgeoisie is constantly being opposed, interrogated, marginalised and ignored in a way that economic capital never is.

This popular cultural capital can maintain its relative autonomy because the financial economy can exercise control over only a fraction of it. However hard the forces of capital attempt to control cultural production and distribution, there will always be a zero-capital production and circulation system that remains finally and defiantly outside their control, if not beyond their influence: I refer, of course, to that one called 'word of mouth'.

So much critical and theoretical attention has been devoted to the *mass* media in mass society that we have tended to ignore the fact that our urbanised institutionalised society facilitates oral communication at least as well as it does mass communication. We may have concentrated much of our leisure and entertainment into the home,[7] but we attend large schools and universities, many of us work in large organisations, and most belong to or attend some sort of club or social organisation. And we live in neighbourhoods or communities. And in all of these social organisations we talk. Much of this talk is about the mass media and its cultural commodities and much of it is performing a similar cultural function to those commodities - that is, it is representing aspects of our social experience in such a way as to make that experience meaningful and pleasurable to us. These meanings, these pleasures are instrumental in constructing social relations and thus our sense of social identity. Feminists[8] have begun to re-evaluate gossip as part of women's oral culture and to argue that it can be both creative and resistive to patriarchy. The fact that men consistently denigrate it is at least a symptom that they recognise it as a cultural form that is outside their control. And Bakhtin[9] suggests that in an essentially literate society oral culture is necessarily oppositional, for it bears the traces of the political position of its subordinate subcultures. But it does more than this, it is one of the prime media through which these subor-

dinated groups have resisted incorporation, have maintained their social difference.

Oral culture is responsive to and is part of its immediate community. It resists centralisation and the ideological control that goes with it, and it promotes cultural diversity. Like mass culture, it is highly conventional, talk and gossip is as clearly formulaic as any TV crime buster series, but the conventions of talk vary as widely as the social situations or social group within which that talk operates. Teenage girl talk differs from male worker talk, lounge room talk differs from public bar talk, and the differences are in the conventions. When this talk is about the cultural commodities distributed by the mass media, it works to activate and circulate meanings of the text that resonate with the cultural needs of that particular talk community.

Katz and Liebes[10] in their study of ethnic Israeli audiences of *Dallas* found that:

> During and after the program, people discuss what they have seen, and come to collective understandings.... Viewers selectively perceive, interpret and evaluate the programme in terms of local cultures and personal experiences, selectively incorporating it into their minds and lives. (p.28)

This incorporation of the program into local culture is an active, oral process that denies any overwhelming precedence to the Hollywood culture. The audiences participate in the meanings of the program in a way that the Hollywood moguls can neither foresee nor control.

For oral culture is active, participatory. Because the conventions are so well known and so closely related to the social situation of the community, all members of that community can participate more or less equally in the production and circulation of meanings. As a crucial part of the cultural economy talk does not distinguish between producers and consumers.

In its interface with mass culture, oral culture necessarily brings its activeness to that process by which the consumer or the product becomes a producer of meanings. An important part of a mass produced text's ability to appeal to a wide diversity of audiences is the ease with which its conventions can be made to interact productively with the conventions of the speech community within which it is circulating.

Thus feminist critics[11] have shown how the conventions of daytime soap opera (its 'nowness', its concern with relationships and reactions, the real-seemingness of its characters) enable it to interact fruitfully and creatively with women's gossip.

It is, of course, the polysemy of the TV text that allows its easy incorporation into a wide diversity of sub-cultures. The semiotic effort of TV is not to produce meanings but to control and hierarchise them. *Dallas* simply

has more meanings than Hollywood can control or than any one audience group can activate. Recent studies of TV news[12] have shown how it is replete with meanings that escape from or contradict the ideological control that the news format attempts to impose. This plurality of meanings is, of course, not a structureless pluralism, but is tightly organised around textual and social power. The preferred meanings in TV are generally those that serve the interests of the dominant classes: other meanings are structured in relations of dominance-subordination to these preferred ones as the social groups that activate them are structured in a power relationship within the social system. The textual attempt to curtail meaning is the semiotic equivalent of the exercise of social power over the diversity of subordinate social groups. There is an unwinnable hegemonic contest for meanings within the text, just as the text is part of the unwinnable hegemonic social struggle. The relations of meanings within the text are structured by the differential distribution of textual power in the same way that social groups are related according to the differential distribution of social power. The polysemic text is no haven for the liberal pluralist of deconstructionism; all meanings are not equal and the activation of any one set of them does not occur at the unmotivated whim of the reader. Meanings are activated by a process of struggle as social interests are promoted by a process of struggle.

Ang[13] and Hobson[14] both use the notion of play to account for the way that their subjects watch *Dallas and Crossroads* respectively. In particular, their women viewers played with the boundary between reality and representation. Both authors (as do Tulloch and Moran[15]) contradict the common application of the 'cultural dope' fallacy to explain women's readings of soap opera: the female fans are, so the (usually) male proponents of the fallacy assert, incapable of telling the difference between the fictional and the real, and are thus 'doped' into thinking that the characters in soap opera are real people. Ang, Hobson and Tulloch and Moran all found evidence of fans' belief in the 'reality' of the represented characters, but also found that the women knew what they were doing when they made this confusion. It was a playful, controlled self-delusion that increased their pleasure, and put them in a position of greater power within the process of representation. It also enhanced TV's intersection with their oral culture.

Play of this sort is a form of empowerment because it devolves the final stage of the process of representation to the subordinate. This power may not in itself be oppositional or radical, but it is, at the very least, the power to be different. It is perhaps too much to expect popular art which, in its commodity form, is produced and distributed by capitalist institutions to be directly radical or subversive. But its indirect subversiveness may be greater than most theorists have given it credit for. The dominant value system works towards homogenisation, and homogenisation is a powerful reactionary force, for the value system that it tries to universalise is always that of the socially power-

ful. The power to be different, then, is a crucial, if not the crucial, stance of resistance.

There is a familiar rhetoric of values here that proposes that diversity is good, homogeneity is bad, and few would take issue with that as a general principle. The problem lies in deciding what constitutes homogeneity and what diversity.

Diversity is not simply to be measured in terms of the variety of programs transmitted: diversity of readings is equally, if not more, important. Paradoxically, diversity of readings may best be stimulated by a greater homogeneity of programming. A widely distributed single program, such as *Dallas*, with 'non-controversial content' may not be an agent of homogenisation after all, for to reach its multitude of diverse audiences it must be an 'open' text that allows for a great deal of cultural diversity in its readings, and thus provides considerable semiotic space for the receiving cultures or subcultures to negotiate *their* meanings, rather than the ones preferred by the broadcasters.

A diversity that is deliberately constructed by TV producers and schedulers is likely to be one that segments the audience into the markets required by the advertisers, which may or may not coincide with the subcultural formations constructed by the people. Of course, a diversity of voices on TV *can* be a good thing, but we need to be critical in our understanding of what constitutes diversity and what constitutes a good thing. A greater variety of closed texts that deliver market segments to advertisers may not be as socially desirable as a narrower range of more open texts, where the diversity is a function of the people rather than of the producers.

Wilson and Gutierrez[16] (1985) argue that the new technologies, particularly cable, allow the media to exploit subcultural diversity, and to commodify ethnic and minority audiences in order to sell them to advertisers. *Dallas*, for all its apparent homogeneity, may well be a more diversified program than the variety of offerings of such multiple special-interest channels, and in so far as its diversification is audience produced rather than centrally produced, it is, I argue, more likely to maintain cultural differences and to produce subculturally specific meanings and pleasures.

By the same token, it may well be the case that a national identity constructed by producers and cultural policy may not coincide with the sense of nationhood felt, if at all, by subordinate groups within the state. Thus Muecke[17] has reminded us the Aboriginal cultural identity in contemporary Australia may best be served by articulating itself, not with an 'Australian nation', but with black culture in other white dominated countries. The shift in Aboriginal musical taste from Country to Reggae,[18] a shift from a white to a black cultural form, is further evidence that cultural alliances can often cross national political boundaries more fruitfully than being confined within them. Music produced within and against white domination may serve Aboriginal cultural identity far more effectively than any white production of Australian

identity. Similarly, Hodge and Tripp's[19] Aboriginal children who cheered on the Indians as they attacked the wagon train or homestead were constructing a cultural category that included themselves, American Indians (and, incidentally, American blacks) and in so doing were forging their own cultural alliances that ignored the boundaries of any economic or national categories produced by whites. As MacCabe[20] puts it

> The crucial necessity for political action is a felt collectivity. It may be that cultural forms indicate to us that politically enabling collectivities are to be located across subcultures, be they national or international.

In a less overtly political sphere, it may be, too, that *Miami Vice* is more Australian than *A Fortunate Life*. We should ask which Australians make which meanings of Australia from yet another saga of the Anglo Saxon male immigrant enduring and finally conquering the bush, and, in so doing, building his own and his nation's character as though they were equal identities. And we must set against this *Miami Vice* with its late capitalist, consumerist, pleasure centred society, where drugs, sex, sun, sensuality, leisure, music, and, above all, postmodern metropolitan style are the order of the day. *Miami Vice* is a racial cocktail wherein the white Anglo Saxon hero maintains his representational power by just managing to cling to his narrative dominance by his white (though grubby) fingernails, and this Miami may enable Sydneysiders to articulate and experience their sense of contemporary Australianness much more satisfyingly than any of the white bush epics so beloved of the mini-serialisers. Australian readings are not directly or necessarily determined by the national origin of the cultural commodity.

There will always, in the industrialised cultures, be a conflict of interest between producers/distributors on the one hand and the various formations of the people on the other. The two economies, the financial and the cultural, are the opposing sides of this struggle. The financial economy attempts to use TV as an agent of homogenisation: for *it* TV is centred, singular in its functionality and is located in its centres of production and distribution. In the cultural economy, however, TV is entirely different. It is decentred, diffuse, located in the multiplicity of its modes and moments of reception. TV is the plurality of its reading practices, the democracy of its pleasures and it can only be understood in its fragments. It promotes and provokes a network of resistances to its own power whose attempt to homogenise and hegemonise breaks down on the instability and multiplicity of its meanings and pleasures.

Despite a generation of TV, that most centrally produced and widely distributed popular art form, western societies have resisted total homogenisation. Feminists have shown that we do not all of us have to be patriarchs, other class, ethnic, age, and regional differences are also alive and well. Wilson and Gutierrez[21] whose book is appropriately subtitled "Diversity and the end of

Mass Communication" show how ethnic minorities in the USA have maintained and even strengthened their separate identities, despite the homogenising thrust of the mass media. In the USA the difference between black English and white English has widened over the past ten years, despite the white dominance of the media and educational systems. Internationally, the USA and, to a lesser extent, Britain have dominated the flow of both news and entertainment, yet I see little evidence of a global surge of popularity for the western nations and their values.

It is capital that provides the access to the means of production and distribution in the two parallel financial economies. But it is the meanings and pleasures of the cultural economy that determine the extent of the economic return on that capital. In this sense the cultural economy drives the financial in a dialectic force that counters the power of capital. Mass mediated popular art must contain within it the opposing but linked forces of capital and the people if it is to circulate effectively in both financial and cultural economies. Far from being the agent of the dominant classes, it is the prime site where the dominant have to recognise the insecurity of their power, where they have to encourage cultural difference with all the threat to their own position that this implies.

Notes

1 Stuart Hall, "Notes on Deconstructing 'The Popular'", in R. Samuel (ed) *People's History and Socialist Theory* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), pp.227-240.

2 Ien Ang, *Watching Dallas* (London: Methuen, 1985).

3 Elihu Katz and Tamar Liebes. The results of their study of ethnic minorities' readings of *Dallas* appear in a number of places, the most important are: "Once upon a Time in *Dallas*", *Intermedia*, v.12, no.3, 1984, pp.28-32, "Mutual Aid in the Decoding of *Dallas*: preliminary notes from a cross-cultural study" in P. Drummond and R. Paterson (eds), *Television in Transition*, (London: British Film Institute, 1985), pp.187-198. "On the Critical Ability of Television Viewers": paper presented at the seminar *Rethinking the Audience*, (University of Tubingen, February 1987).

4 Nick Garnham, "Concepts of Culture: public policy and the cultural industries, *Cultural Studies* , v.1, no.1, (1987), pp.23-37.

5 Pierre Bourdieu, "The Aristocracy of Culture" in *Media, Culture and Society*, v.1 (1980), pp.225-254.

6 Dorothy Hobson, *Crossroads: the drama of a soap opera* (London: Methuen, 1982).

7 Garnham, and John Hartley and Tom O'Regan "Quoting not Science but Sideboards: television in a new way of life" in *Mass Communication Review Yearbook* v.7, (Beverley Hills: Sage) (forthcoming).

8 E.g. see Mary Ellen Brown, "The Politics of Soaps: pleasure and feminine empowerment," *Australian Journal of Cultural Studies* v.4, no.2 (1987), pp.1-25; Mary Ellen Brown and Linda Barwick,"Fables and Endless Genealogies" (published in this issue), and Hobson.
9 Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).
10 Katz and Liebes, 1984.
11 E.g. Christine Geraghty, "The Continuous Serial - a Definition" in R. Dyer et. al., *Coronation Street*, (London: British Film Institute, 1981), pp.9-26; Brown, Brown and Barwick, and John Fiske, *Television Culture: popular pleasures and politics* (London: Methuen, 1987).
12 E.g. John Hartley, "Encouraging Signs: television and the power of dirt, speech and scandalous categories", in Walter Rowland and Brian Watkins (eds), *Interpreting Television: current research perspectives* (Beverly Hills: Sage,1984), pp.119-141, and Julian Lewis "Decoding Television News", and Peter Dahlgren "The Modes of Reception: for a hermeneutics of TV News", both in Drummond and Paterson (eds), *Television in Transition* , (London: British Film Institute, 1985),pp.205-249 and pp.205-249 respectively.
13 See Ang, passim.
14 See Hobson, passim.
15 John Tulloch and Albert Moran, *A Country Practice : "quality soap"* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1986).
16 C. Wilson and F. Gutierrez, *Minorities and Media: diversity and the end of mass communication* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1985).
17 Stephen Muecke, paper presented at the ASSA Conference, Sydney, 1986.
18 Eric Michaels, paper presented at the ASSA Conference, Sydney, 1986.
19 Robert Hodge and David Tripp, *Children and Television* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986).
20 Colin MacCabe, "Defining Popular Culture" in Colin MacCabe (ed) *High Theory/Low Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), p.1-10.
21 Wilson and Gutierrez, passim.