

Cultural Bulimia

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Famously, Raymond Williams argued that *culture* is one of the most complicated words in the English language.¹ It would be reasonable to assume that its complications are accretions, i.e. that an original and simple word, meaning, say, to grow, has been stretched, morphed and twisted around to the loss of any core reference it once possessed. Anyone harbouring suspicion of the academic world could no doubt explain this by wagging a finger at meddling academics prone to too much intellectual monkey business.

Yet they would be wrong as, according to Williams, from the beginning the word had a range of meanings. *Colonies, cults and cultivation* were there at the outset, like a chain linking habitation, worship and natural growth. To paraphrase Williams, culture may be ordinary but it has also always existed in a state of flux. What gives contemporary complications of the word *culture* their special quality is that they are flavoured with all sorts of contestation, rivalry, dispute and fissure, which have effects and consequences beyond the confines of academia.

It is one thing for a word to have a number of meanings, to be prone to semantic slippages, but it is quite another for those meanings to be incompatible. Here a common set of beliefs gels protagonists together in such a way that arguments are primarily disagreements over the interpretation of accepted rules, etc. However with the word *culture*, and its possible meanings and interpretations, we are confronted with the wedge which splits and tears this neat and tidy social space. Here, there is no shared set of ground rules. The divisions which spill out from culture flow along frequently disparate, isolated paths. We would undoubtedly be able to come to an agreement over semantic differences of a word, but the argument resulting from setting Beethoven against Tammy Wynette in the cultural stakes would present infinitely more insurmountable problems. Today, the complications embedded in the word *culture* point to incommensurable interpretations. Ultimately they speak of cultural and social divisions.

The root of much of the division has been the effect and influence of what has become known as *popular culture*. Whether it be art, opera, classical music, literature or ballet, the spectre of this 'other' form of culture (whose name has shifted from kitsch to mass- to popular-) has shadowed the paths of these more traditional, accepted examples of culture (what we might once-upon-a-time have referred to as *Culture with a Capital C*).

Existing in a peculiar parental relationship, popular culture was in its earlier more lumpen incarnations often tarred as the bastard, vampiric child of Culture with a Capital C. Contemporary forms of communication such as film and television have frequently been abused for feeding on and sucking the life from these noble inhabitants of Culture's lofty palaces. While today such black and white, slap dash cartooning of the cultural landscape would be unthinkable (for all but the most mule-like conservative), it's worth remembering that our present more enlightened cultural habitat is a relatively new phenomenon.

While popular culture may be an elusive, shape shifting, mischievous body which academics, artists and intellectuals tussle over, previous theorised incarnations didn't have the same trouble. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, the notion of kitsch had certain, specifiable properties over which there was a broad intellectual consensus. Similarly, the idea of mass culture conformed to a given set of social and economic relations. What unified the intellectual reference to kitsch and mass culture was not just the obligatory disparagement of "the debased and academized simulacra of genuine culture."² The

formulation of the concepts of kitsch and mass culture also shared the critical, even radical, analysis of the relationship between low cultural value and the overarching presence of management and marketeering. This was best summed up in the term *culture industry*, understood as the primacy of industrial and commercial interests in the production of goods that are barely cultural at all. In this schema, the stench of business ensured that consumers of such products were relegated to the cultural wasteland. The idea of being banished to a cultural wasteland is a potent one; it is what fuelled the dystopian, alienated landscape of cultural conservatives such as T.S. Eliot, and fuelled some of Clement Greenberg's more extreme pronouncements on art and culture. Entrenched and seemingly intractable, it was this conception of culture which held sway. Such a dystopian view of the corrupting evils of popular culture's beguiling charms enabled dedicated protectors of all that was noble and right to scaremonger publicly about the contaminating effects of film and television.

The culture which has no name

The term *popular culture* was initially brought in to protect radical or authentic culture (a modern version of folk art) from the same criticisms. Richard Hoggart's book *The Uses of Literacy*, coupled with his setting up of the *Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies* at Birmingham University in 1963, ensured that he is widely seen—as Jim McGuigan has written in his overview of the history and evolution of cultural studies, *Cultural Populism*—as being responsible for a shift in British cultural debate from "a stark opposition between elitist minority culture and lowly mass culture towards a serious engagement

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with the value and values of majority cultural experience." If cultural theory schools across Britain have a theoretical godfather it is Hoggart, not Williams.

After the popular culture explosion in the late '50s and early '60s, the term *popular culture* became more capacious in its use, referring to experiences that had once been thought kitsch and commercial. Hoggart's rather romantic, genteel conception of popular culture was quickly replaced by the white heat of a far more robust, hungry form of popular culture. A determined group of radicals campaigned against the use of such divisive stereotypes of culture and cultural consumption, turning such terms as *kitsch* and *mass culture* into anachronisms.

If the substitution of the term *popular culture* for its predecessors had done away with conservative and radical anxieties about it, then popular culture would possibly be no more than an anthropological term referring to a heterogeneous field of cultural and economic activity. Instead, it is one of the most contested and misconstrued pieces of jargon of the 20th and 21st Century.

Stuart Hall, one of the pioneers of Cultural theory, remarked that symbolic aggression against mass culture was always, though perhaps cryptically, a version of aggression against the masses. It is worth pursuing the hypothesis that repressed fear and loathing for the working class returns as contempt for mass culture, but the argument has

to go further than that. The term *popular culture* was coined by intellectuals, aesthetes and the educated in order to refer to the culture of others. From the outset it was a projection. If the term *popular culture* refers to anything at all it is not the people or the culture it purports to name but the fantasies and anxieties of those who are doing the naming. This is why it is often said that *popular culture* means nothing, that it picks out no specifiable set of cultural norms or qualities; popular culture is nothing other than the culture which is excluded from legitimate or cultivated culture (and defined from within legitimate culture as its other). This results in a very confused or at best weak sense of popular culture's own identity.

It gets worse. If popular culture is defined negatively and relationally, then the radical incorporation of popular culture into the university and the gallery creates even more problems. When the academics of cultural studies include popular culture as a legitimate object of intellectual study then the last remaining criterion of its identity is fudged. The same sort of thing happens when artists and curators sidle up to popular culture, permitting its access to galleries and artworks in a radical gesture that erases the divisions which maintain art's privilege. The effect is that popular culture doesn't only attain its longed for prestige but loses its distinctive character. If popular culture is excluded culture, then its inclusion turns this empty category into an indeterminable boundary. This is, roughly speaking, what has emerged as the current cultural impasse: the divide between art and popular culture has slackened or disappeared so that either value and criteria has to be found to reinstate cultural division³ or we should no longer think in terms of cultural division. Neither option is satisfactory.

Culture is Ordinary

Williams almost filed for adoption papers on the word *culture*. Nobody since Matthew Arnold has had such an impact on the way the term is used. It was Arnold's evangelical tub-thumping about the value of Culture—for it to represent "the best that has been thought or known in the world current everywhere"—which, Williams recognised, was the trigger for the now widespread suspicion of all talk about culture.

It would be wrong to say that Williams' concept of culture was not normative. But, he argued so much against the normative conception of Culture that he produced an ethics of the value of the forms of life which that normative conception of Culture brushes aside. An extended and serious engagement in culture based on the fact of division and difference might have extended the scholarship of the connoisseur to every last hiding place of dignity in the lives of ordinary people, annihilating the toffee-nosed superiority-complex while reinvigorating the intelligent aspirations of culture. Instead, culture became the battleground of ideological sectarianism, postmodernist posturing, identity politics, political correctness and post-colonial, -feminist, -Marxist studies.

Williams may still prove to have the requisite subtlety to outdo most of our misgivings about the holistic approach to cultural analysis and social transformation. It is Richard Hoggart's legacy, however—his establishment of cultural studies as an academic exercise—which takes the limelight today. It is not through lack of respect that we hesitate to call it an academic discipline; cultural studies is internally resistant to having strict demarcations placed on its interdisciplinary activities. Initially, cultural studies had to be of a politically radical hue before it could maintain that all form of culture is worthy of analysis irrespective of their relative prestige. The position implies a

full-frontal attack on the realm of aesthetics which dominated cultural discourse and effectively ruled out any potential alternative by passing itself off as the very soul of humanity, all else being unworthy of the term *culture*. So how did cultural studies turn into the wretched display of subject positions without recourse to judgement, value and ethics? Before we can answer that we must finally face up to the high-tide of cultural studies, a scholastic world in which poor, black kids in inner city Britain 'resist' and 'subvert' power through the ingenuity of their haircuts.

We don't doubt the radical credentials of the initial intentions of cultural studies, and the impact the work has had. It would be interesting, however, to compare it with the history and development of ultraviolence in Hollywood. At first it was something of a scandal for Hollywood to depict the lives of the lumpen proletariat in a graphic and realist style, but at each step when the brutality gave way to charm or flavour the criminality and frankness had to be stepped up. It was almost enough in itself that Hoggart wrote seriously and sympathetically about the working class, but Dick Hebdige, writing in the '70s, was only interested in subcultural, prickly, indigestible elements of the working class. The idea that heroes had to be good and wholesome was shot to pieces. What couldn't be sustained, though, was the tendency in cultural studies to make political claims on behalf of the yobs, mods or rastas and later the fans of boybands and romance novels. We don't mean that the politics of resisting the authority of school teachers or of indulging in mainstream culture was inflated, we mean that it didn't exist. It exists as a politics only insofar as the study of them interferes with academic customs and standards. This is a classic case of projection.

The reason there is now an impasse within academic schools of cultural studies is that its radical politics was based to some degree on the challenge to a politically unacceptable, entrenched cultural schema. Within this orthodoxy a routinised aesthetic gradient cast popular culture out of serious discussion. Radicals took this normativity by the scruff of the neck and saw what was valuable in the most detested and debased cultural forms. What's more, it worked. It turned out that no one behaved in the manner which cultural prejudice had expected. Writers such as John Fiske 'discovered' that ordinary people watching TV were active and discriminatory; the surrender to consumerism was done on an individual basis, and with intelligence; scholars discovered that different individuals bought the same newspapers and used them in different ways. Well done, but why did it take so long and why did we have to disabuse ourselves of the prejudices against popular culture before we could assault the myths about art? Now, at long last, you don't have to be an old-style Marxist to acknowledge that artists are no different from anyone else; art is just as likely to include rubbish as everlasting truth, galleries are part of the tourist industry, and the supposed superiority of art over mass culture has to be tested case by case. Having established these inversions of established wisdom, though, the radicals of cultural studies had achieved the academic levelling of art and popular culture (anything now, it seems, can go into a Ph.D. thesis), but that doesn't mean that all cultural division has vanished, or indeed that all culture is of equal value.

Cultural studies failed to question the relationship between the scholar and culture, it merely extended the range of the scholar's objects of analysis. The forms of attention expected of an intellectual were not challenged, even if punks and schoolgirls were magically accorded the qualities and attitudes which were previously the pre-

serve of the educated. No, the reason a new aestheticism emerged in the wake of cultural studies and the social history of art is that the radical politics which furnished the latter with its progressive vision of culture did not equip it for an encounter with recidivist philistines (the slightly bruised cultural conservative who had been saving up arguments about value and quality just in case the momentum of cultural democratisation would slip). It makes no sense, and holds no radical promise, to defend the cultural worth of *Some Mothers Do 'Ave 'Em*, *The Bay City Rollers* or *Star Wars*. It's not that these are irredeemably 'bad' examples of culture, or even that it is not possible to enjoy them with a sizeable degree of intellectual, moral or political savvy. But the procedure of attending to popular culture for the purposes of those intellectual, moral or political principles leaves something to be desired. Again, we're not trying to insist on the irreducible worthlessness of those who love popular culture, quite the opposite, what is frustrating, infuriating, is that their affection for it is being turned into its opposite.

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Insofar as intellectuals translate popular pleasures into radical gestures, the things which count in popular culture—the forms of attention and affection which popular culture lives off—the very things which guarantee its popularity, are being sidelined. In other words, cultural elitists regard popular pleasures to be hardly worthy of the title pleasure, and radical commentators fail to attend to this normative ranking of pleasure because they prefer a different vocabulary entirely, to speak of political acts rather than entertaining experiences. Artists have done the same, reclaiming popular culture for artistic forms of attention. A whole genre of art has built itself out of an anthropological relationship between the artist and popular culture. It is what Hal Foster calls the 'ethnographic turn of contemporary art':

"In our current state of artistic-theoretical ambivalences and cultural-political impasses, anthropology is the compromise discourse of choice".⁴

One reason why anthropology seems so desirable to contemporary artists, especially in their relations with popular culture and everyday life, is that it simultaneously holds out a generous hand to the downgraded aspects of social life and guarantees that the artist's own privileged position will not be infected by the values of the befriended culture. Anthropology offers a model in which the artist can engage in 'low' culture with the emphasis squarely on knowledge rather than pleasure, in circumstances where the pleasures of popular culture are hardly considered to merit the term pleasure at all.

Questions about art's relationship to popular culture are rarely pitched with anything but the most scant ethical attention. When writers are not merely observing the traffic between two worlds, they moan about standards or exclusions—quality or equality. It generally depends on whether the writer thinks that the two worlds ought to remain firmly separated or nicely, kindly, democratically fused. It is as if the elitist is happy to think of cultural rivalry so long as elitist culture is on top, whereas the populist is not happy unless rivalries within culture have been dissolved. Think, for instance, of the Leftist recoil from young British art's avowed populism or somatic pleasures, its

media fuelled glamour or unmediated mundanity. This art since the late '80s, it seems, has broken into a retreat from the critical, intellectual, mature business of taking culture seriously. Or, 'high art lite'—to use Julian Stallabrass' slogan—carries 'a marked lack of seriousness.'

Stallabrass' argument—that there is an 'anti-theoretical heart of high art lite'—can be read as a demand to return to established modes of thinking, a rearguard attempt to reinstate an old hierarchy of pleasures and knowledges. But art today cannot rely on such pedigree—not because serious thinking is haughty or corrupting, but because the situation requires us to think differently.

The problem is not just with critics who demand that artists take art seriously. Artists too have often sidled up to popular culture with their enthusiasm dampened by anxiety. Fair enough, perhaps: no artist wants their romance with popular culture to consume their romance with art. The danger, though, as we've often seen, is that of being branded unserious and uncritical, to be seen as part of the culture of the spectacle and thus to have fallen through the safety net of art's autonomy. The anxiety is related to real effects but it is almost always overplayed. It is as if every tentative step toward the popular has to be followed by an over compensatory gesture of resistance to it, a theatrical restatement of art's need for its ablation of the philistine impulses in entertainment and commerce. Such artists are the bulimics of popular culture, the more they are drawn to it the more forcefully they immunise themselves against it.

Notes

- 1 Raymond Williams, *Keywords*, Fontana, p.87
- 2 Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch", *Pollock and After*, Francis Frascina (ed), Harper and Row, 1985, p.25
- 3 Conservative, art critics like Hilton Kramer put their considerable weight against the incursions of popular culture into the vaunted confines of art with a number of caveats. The traditions he is defending, the modernist legacy of high-powered cultural vanguardism, happen to be replete with hostilities towards an older form of conservative immobility. When Hilton Kramer hears the word 'revolver' he reaches for his culture because he is scared someone is about to play a Beatles album.
- 4 Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real*, MIT press, p183



TOP:
Raymond
Williams
ABOVE:
'Portrait of J.
Beagles', Jim
Ward