

culture & pedagogy

On the Popular Art of Reviewing Popular Art

ROBERT BRIGGS

— CULTURAL STUDIES AND 'THE POPULAR'

Today cultural studies is regularly credited (or charged) with having challenged and transformed a once-dominant, unreflective concept of 'mass culture' which sought to depict popular cultural forms as politically dangerous or as morally and aesthetically inferior to 'authentic culture' or art. To be sure, contemporary theorists of popular culture are quick to point out the potentially anti-democratic sentiment expressed by early depictions of so-called 'mass' culture as witless and trivial if not, in fact, responsible for many of modern society's ills. Indeed, it's rare to see the views of a Q.D. Leavis, say, or a Theodor Adorno given much credence anywhere in contemporary cultural studies—or even in literary studies, where greatest resistance to 'the popular' might be most expected. Popular culture would appear to be no longer subject to the kinds of prejudice that once characterised the elitist denunciation of anything short of capital-C 'Culture' (as 'the best that has been thought and said in the world', for example). This development is undoubtedly owing in part to the influence in cultural studies of the sophisticated theories of culture enabled by the 'post-structuralist turn' and to the subsequent emphasis on the indeterminacy of meaning and the multiplicity of uses and interpretations of cultural objects. But it is also enabled by cultural studies' democratic challenge to the conservative politics and to the Marxist social theory that inform Leavis's and Adorno's arguments respectively. According to some contemporary accounts of culture (and of cultural studies), in fact, the old 'high/low' distinction doesn't even apply in today's 'postmodern' times, when the boundaries separating such realms as Art and Mass Media are fluid and permeable, and when BA program structures are so

'flexible' that students can study Shakespearean drama alongside hip hop culture. On this account, 'the popular' is no longer a question; it's a fact of life! The popular is so bound up with anything we think or do nowadays that it can't possibly be ignored. It circulates in a variety of ways, through a diversity of media, and in a heterogeneity of forms, and it's through a focus on these differences—of media, of interpretive contexts, of textual histories—that the study of popular culture has staked its place as one of the leading commentators on the issues that define our time.

Still, the surety and complacency of this view invite questions about cultural studies' influence on various practices of cultural assessment. Certainly, questions have been raised more than once in the history of cultural studies about its ability to transform prevailing concepts and practices of culture. John Hartley, for instance, has questioned the extent to which cultural studies has popularised its intellectual and critical insights, by noting a 'continuing public allegiance' to 'the ideology of authenticity'.¹ Ultimately, Hartley attributes the relative impotence, as it were, of cultural studies on this question of cultural authenticity to an intellectual agenda, which has in turn shaped a pedagogical program. The result is 'a kind of critical common sense which has created a demarcation line between Cultural Studies and the aesthetic disciplines (Film and Literary Studies), and further demarcation lines between popular and other media, between reality and art, truth and fiction'.² Meanwhile, Ian Hunter has argued that cultural studies' historical attachment to a general concept of culture as 'a whole way of life' prevents it from having *any* impact outside the limited spheres of its own (inter)disciplinary practices.³ Disconnected from the 'actual array of historical institutions' in which human attributes are formed, cultural studies' favoured concept of culture, in Hunter's view, actually inhibits attempts 'to develop practical forms of cultural analysis and assessment', and thus dooms the discipline to political irrelevance.⁴

Beyond these general critiques of cultural studies' effectivity, moreover, there are other signs that the case for the discipline's success at transforming prevailing concepts of popular culture may be somewhat overstated. For instance, and notwithstanding the apparent transformation of academic attitudes towards popular culture, Adorno's and Leavis's unflattering views of popular forms strike me as interesting precisely for their similarity to many 'non-academic' assessments of popular texts. How often, in other words, has it been said in spaces outside the university that such and such a film or book is thoroughly 'generic', 'commercial', 'ideological', 'frivolous', 'lightweight', etc.? And while popular forms, such as television sitcoms and action films, are regularly enjoyed and sometimes celebrated by their audiences, it is not at all unusual to hear both the reviewers and even the viewers of such texts characterise them as second-rate, formulaic, or stereotypical in their portrayal of marginalised identities. There are, I think, signs—some less citable than others—that the apparent 'obsolescence' of the 'high/low' distinction, and of mass culture discourse more generally, is some-

thing of an illusion. We can see it operating in the guilt or embarrassment felt by certain readers when they are 'caught out' reading a Mills & Boon or Harlequin novel. We can see it especially in the way in which the 'consumption' of popular texts is sometimes justified: in a person's defense of their decision to see a Schwarzenegger film, say, by claiming that they felt like watching something that wouldn't require them 'to think'. Such sentiments speak to me of a peculiar contradiction: a kind of concurrent acceptance and condemnation. We can find in them at best an affirmation of popular narrative via a neutralisation of the *moral* dimension to the 'high/low' distinction, but with no corresponding transformation of the *aesthetic* and hence *formal* distinction between 'High Culture' and plain old everyday 'popular culture'. To that extent, what might be called a prevailing 'critical prejudice' against popular culture would seem to manifest itself not simply or solely as a particular kind of (negative) evaluation but more subtly as a specific presumption of popular culture as a fundamentally different kind of cultural object to 'artistic' forms of culture, one which calls for a very different kind of *response* and a very different set of *descriptions* than is called for by 'serious' cultural texts.

A recent contribution to the study of popular fiction by Ken Gelder proves instructive on this point. While 'speak[ing] up for the reputation of popular fiction', Gelder's study goes some way towards demonstrating that certain elements of mass culture theory continue to delimit and largely define the ways in which people speak about and engage with popular culture.⁵ Against the prevailing view that cultural studies' affirmation of the popular entails a repudiation of the 'high/low' distinction, that is, Gelder delineates the distinct logics informing engagements with popular fiction and argues that these logics are radically different from those that order the production and interpretation of 'Literature' proper. Thus where 'a work of Literature is often thought to have "transcended" genre', the 'entire field of popular fiction is written for, marketed and consumed generically'.⁶ Similarly, where 'literary fiction is ambivalent at best about its industrial connections ... popular fiction generally speaking has no such reservations', with its logics of industry and entertainment collectively defining the field 'quite literally [as] a "culture industry"'.⁷ Gelder borrows the latter phrase, of course, from Adorno and Horkheimer, but against the 'negative connotations' invested in the term by those critics Gelder uses it 'a little more sympathetically'.⁸ The term thus becomes a means for identifying popular fiction as 'an entire apparatus of production, distribution and consumption'.⁹ According to Gelder, this apparatus underpins or constitutes a far more diverse and complex field than Adorno and Horkheimer would admit, but it contrasts nevertheless with Literature's proximity to 'the art world'.¹⁰ While Gelder is thus keen to affirm the logics and practices of popular fiction, adopting a non-reductive and non-dismissive account of the 'field', his comprehensive study nevertheless insists on that field's *distinctiveness*, 'attending to its various logics and practices and detailing aspects of the way in which it behaves as

a distinctive but heterogeneous body of writing'.¹¹ Crucially, moreover, Gelder depicts this distinctiveness as being recognised and propagated not so much by academic commentators on popular culture as by the producers of popular fiction and, most importantly, by its *readers*:

Literature deploys a set of logics and practices that are distinctive in kind to those deployed in the field of popular fiction. Readers, of course, may very well move from the one to the other, since reading interests can at times be flexible and adaptable. But in doing so, these different logics and practices are surely registered, which means that Literature and popular fiction will *necessarily* not be read or 'processed' in the same way.¹²

The emphasis in this passage on the word 'necessarily' is Gelder's and is testament to the extent to which existing, concrete practices of popular fiction production and consumption remain organised by a logic of popular fiction as 'the opposite of Literature'.¹³ On the basis of Gelder's comprehensive account, in other words, it would seem that—claims to the contrary notwithstanding—the cultural field remains divided along the lines of something like the supposedly outdated 'high/low' distinction. Thus while Gelder's study doesn't directly speak to the issue, it nevertheless presents some discomfiting questions to orthodox views of cultural studies' role and success in transforming prevailing concepts of popular culture.¹⁴

In view of such questions, the following discussion seeks to revisit understandings of cultural studies' relation to putatively outmoded views of popular culture—the better to assess the possibility of and strategies for transforming prevailing concepts of culture. With an eye, however, to the potential resistance of mass culture discourse to cultural studies' counter-arguments, the analysis turns less on a review of such counter-arguments than on an examination of some of the discipline's *material* points of connection to (or, indeed, disconnection from) the forms and practices of mass culture critique. Rather than simply accepting the view that cultural studies has 'moved on' from the critical prejudices that may have defined its pasts, that is, I want to raise the possibility that cultural studies' intellectual and pedagogical practice may actually be complicit with the reproduction of a logic of mass culture. In order to reach that point, the discussion begins in the following section with a reading of two examples of what I take to be the effects of mass culture discourse. The first of these examples concerns a brief review of the Clint Eastwood-directed film, *Million Dollar Baby* (2004) and shows the shape of this discourse when it takes an aesthetic guise; the second examines some apparently feminist responses to a jewellery advertisement and follows the same discourse in its political form. These two isolated examples are undoubtedly insufficient as 'evidence' of cultural studies' effects on prevailing concepts of popular culture. Taken together, however, they may (at the least) suggest avenues for re-evaluating the points at which cultural studies may hope to connect with popular practice—if not (at the most) lending significant

weight to the view that cultural studies' attempted transformations of mass culture criticism have had little effect outside the limited sphere of its own practices of cultural criticism.

— THE POLITICS OF MASS CULTURE

As a minimal indication of how the assessment of popular culture may remain organised by notions of mass culture, consider the following passage from a commentary by Kevin Miller on *Million Dollar Baby* (*MDB*):

'Some choices you don't want to make,' says Scrap, the one-time heavyweight contender who narrates this film. Unfortunately, his boss, boxing trainer Frankie Dunn, is about to be presented with a real doozie.

It doesn't appear that way at first. In fact, had I not been aware of all the controversy surrounding this film, I would have been disappointed that a brilliant director like Clint Eastwood had devoted his time to what was turning out to be a compelling but not quite innovative boxing movie. And then, right when the formula calls for a 'Rocky-like' character to start shouting 'Adrian! Adrian!' with his/her eyes swollen shut and arms raised in victory, Eastwood pulls the old 'one-two' and knocks us face-first onto the canvas.

When the world finally comes into focus, we find ourselves in a completely different moral landscape. Up to this point, the film has revolved around a traditional win/lose axis. Now we are in life and death territory, and it doesn't look like there's any escape—at least none that would cost Frankie anything less than his soul.

The choice Miller speaks of here is the one presented to Frankie when Maggie—the female boxer whom Frankie has been coaching and who has become a quadriplegic after an accident in the boxing ring—asks Frankie to end her suffering. Miller goes on to paint the film as showing the agony that one would surely feel in Frankie's position, having to wrestle with a moral code that condemns the taking of life and with a love that demands precisely that. But even from this brief extract, it's easy enough to see that Miller's review shows a continuing allegiance to a particular discourse of aesthetics. In it we find a typical critical distinction made between supposedly 'artistic' films and supposedly 'formulaic' films. Eastwood is no stranger to the accusation of 'formula', with reviewers charging many of his westerns (not even discounting the sublime *Unforgiven*) and particularly the Dirty Harry films with being 'formulaic'. In the above commentary, Miller verges on making a similar charge with regard to *MDB*. What 'saves' the movie, it seems, is the (literal) sucker punch and the ensuing 'drama' and 'tragedy'. As mandated by the 'high/low' distinction, in other words, the film's significance, according to Miller (though not only him), hinges on its divergence from a 'formula'. This kind of critical practice is, of course, not uncommon in the world of film-reviewing.

Indeed, so much seems invested in film reviews in disparaging films for being ‘formulaic’ that any film which doesn’t display overt signs of its ‘artistic sensibility’—usually, though not solely, via a focus on ‘character’ as distinct from plot or via the use of ‘unconventional’ film and narrative techniques—seems to be evaluated and discussed only in terms of the extent to which it reproduces a formula or some other readily identifiable set of ‘generic features’.¹⁵ Never mind the fact, for instance, that even apparently ‘formulaic’ films can engage with serious issues and complex themes. Never mind the fact that not everything worth reflecting on in this world revolves around tragedy. *MDB*, according to Miller, risked being a ‘compelling but not quite innovative boxing movie’. It risked being ‘formulaic’, but then ‘right when the formula calls for a “Rocky-like” character to start shouting “Adrian! Adrian!” with his/her eyes swollen shut and arms raised in victory, Eastwood pulls the old “one-two” and knocks us face-first onto the canvas’.

What’s particularly notable about Miller’s account of *MDB*’s ‘risky’ trajectory in terms of the Rocky-like ‘formula’ is that Rocky Balboa *loses* the fight in the scene from *Rocky* to which Miller refers. The very film which Miller suggests is exemplary of a particular formulaic narrative, in other words, does not in fact ‘follow the formula’. So, either Miller hasn’t even seen the film he’s ready to judge as formulaic—and if this is the case, what does this say about the prejudices bound up with our critical concepts?—or what Miller really means by ‘formula’ is ‘lack of “life-and-death” drama’. For Miller, and he’s not in the least bit alone in this respect, what’s important about *MDB* is everything that happens *after* the sucker punch. The rest of the film might as well not exist; the first two-thirds, at best, simply establishes the initial situation, into which tragedy will come to intervene. But if we’re going to make the charge of ‘formula’ here, it strikes me that it’s precisely reviewers like Miller who are following a well-established formula. His is the formula that goes something like this: films featuring ‘life-and-death’ drama are Great Art, while films that focus on such menial things as boxing or depict the ‘glorious rise of the underdog’ are second-rate, formulaic films. What’s especially bothersome about this dismissal of the first two-thirds of the film at the expense of the last third is that it’s possible to read the film’s ‘tragic’ events as being just as ‘formulaic’ or ‘predictable’ (albeit in a different way) as Miller implies *Rocky* to be. Almost everything about the last third of the film—from the sucker punch (a legitimate blow makes it harder to feel that Maggie’s injury was ‘unfair’) through the ungrateful family (a supportive family makes Maggie’s situation easier to accept) to Frankie’s disappearance after the deed (living on in an idealised inner turmoil, so we don’t have to see him, maybe, *get over it*)—seems to follow a particular blueprint that, in the context of other, less ‘artistically’ presented and produced films, would be hounded for its ‘lack of realism’ or for its ‘Hollywood sentimentalism’. Yet few (if any) critics have interpreted the film’s ‘tragic’ events as anything other than central to the film’s significance. I can’t help but wonder whether there might rather be something in

the first two thirds of *MDB* that's worthy of comment, but if so, I can barely think what it might be for all the reviews that want to dismiss that part as irrelevant.

Of course, no one expects such 'non-academic' modes of cultural assessment as film reviewing to reproduce the nuances and sophistication of a cultural studies scholar trained in post-structuralism or the politics of popular culture. In many ways, though, that is precisely the point—for where else should one look for signs of cultural studies' intellectual and pedagogical effects, beyond the specialist contexts of academic research and critique, if not in those *non-academic* practices which most closely resemble the kinds of 'critical' work that are, in their more 'scholarly' guises (such as in the work of Adorno or Leavis), ordinarily problematised by cultural studies' post-structuralist and post-Marxist theories of culture? Given the pervasive use of the internet precisely for the purpose of exchanging views about popular cultural forms, moreover, it's easy to see that the critical work of reviewing is by no means confined to a handful of pages in the weekend editions of popular newspapers. Indeed, such work is undertaken whenever the merits or meanings of cultural texts are debated—be it by David and Margaret during a fiery episode of *The Movie Show*, by the members of the Classification Board from the Office of Film and Literature Classification,¹⁶ or by a couple of friends over a post-film cappuccino at the local cafe. Consequently, if Miller's review is in any way indicative of everyday practice, it's worth pausing to consider the extent to which reassessments of mass culture discourse have disseminated beyond the specialist discipline of cultural studies and permeated not just the broader popular consciousness but, more importantly, general popular *practices*. Any potential disjuncture between 'academic' and 'popular' or 'everyday' modes of cultural assessment, that is, should raise the question of cultural studies' effectiveness with regard to the critique and delimitation of prevailing practices of cultural criticism. For if the forms of cultural criticism that circulate routinely in the popular media and in other non-academic sites continue to be those forms that owe their logic to a putatively obsolete discourse on 'mass culture', then to what extent can cultural studies be said to have transformed predominant ways of thinking and talking about popular culture?

In one sense, of course, popular views of popular culture have shifted to some degree, though the extent to which cultural studies may be credited with that transformation remains debatable. This is to say that the 'unofficial' version of the 'high/low' discourse as it functions in reviewing practices is not quite identical to its 'mass culture' quasi-equivalent. For the contemporary, non-academic version of that discourse seeks to distinguish not between two different *forms* of cultural practice—opera versus television, for example—but rather between different *qualities* as identifiable within particular examples of the same form of cultural practice—distinguishing, that is, between particular films (say) on the basis of whether they are 'artistic' or 'formulaic', 'serious' or 'frivolous', 'challenging and confronting' or 'simplistic,

stereotypical and predictable', and so on. It remains the case, nevertheless, that such forms of critique, whether in their 'academic' or their 'popular' forms, reproduce a potentially anti-democratic sentiment, one which discounts the actual pleasures and choices of a significant proportion of cultural 'consumers'. Furthermore, the popular forms of the 'high/low' distinction reproduce the same presumptions of textual power and audience passivity that can be found in the likes of Adorno's and Leavis's arguments. As Janice Radway so rightly put it as far back as 1986:

Not only are cultural objects assumed [in prevailing conceptions of mass culture] to be fixed and determined in advance in the sense that their meaning is given to them by their creators, but they are thought to be determining as well. That is to say, they have the power to dictate or control not only how they are perceived and understood by their purchasers but how they are used. Human beings are concomitantly perceived as passive and somnolent, ... [as having] absolutely no power themselves to act on their environment, to select some objects over others, to use them in creative ways, or to construct their significance idiosyncratically. In effect, traditional mass-culture methodology denies the semiotic capacities and social activities of large numbers of individuals.¹⁷

Radway's reference to the 'semiotic capacities and social activities of large numbers of individuals' marks one of the founding moments in the formation of 'the active audience' thesis. Ironically, however, it is precisely in the context of affirmations of audience 'activity' that the 'high/low' distinction and the mass culture view reveal their most powerful effects, thereby providing perhaps the most compelling reason for reconsidering popular reviewing practices. For when the genre of the review is conceived not as an account of one person's assessment (on behalf of the 'ordinary consumer') of a given cultural text but rather as a discursive practice 'that systematically form[s] the objects of which [it]speaks'¹⁸ and as a disciplinary technique that 'produces subjected and practised bodies, "docile" bodies',¹⁹ it becomes possible to recognise that cultural reviews not only shape the identity of the texts they assess but also function as a kind of informal training in how to engage with or 'interpret' such texts. To the extent that the 'high/low' distinction continues to operate unproblematised in such reviews, therefore, the latter helps produce (as it were) 'formulaic', 'frivolous', 'stereotypical' films (i.e. by reading their significance only as 'formulaic' etc.) and helps train readers to engage with films primarily in those same terms. Notwithstanding arguments regarding the 'interpretive power' of 'active' audiences, in other words, there's a very real sense in which the 'high/low' distinction as it functions in popular reviewing practices *breeds* 'docile' audiences —by training them to engage with popular texts in particular, very circumscribed ways. By predetermining a given text's lack of cultural significance, in other words, by depicting the range of appropriate responses to such a text precisely in terms of those kinds of audience

‘activity’ which popular texts have always been presumed to generate—‘escapism’, ‘mindless pleasure’, if not outright ‘moral debasement’ or ‘political manipulation’—and by thus closing down other possible forms of engagement or interpretation, popular reviewing practices may work systematically to *create* passivity in the form of silence. At best, if such practices do allow or promote an alternative, ‘engaged’ form of response in audiences, that form of ‘activity’ would seem largely to take the form of an almost slavish reproduction of the critical prejudice itself.

Needless to say the effects of such a discursive practice are neither uniform nor guaranteed, and it’s doubtless the case that particular segments of media audiences may engage with cultural texts (including the reviews themselves) in ways that exceed the limits set by mass culture. Nevertheless, if that discourse can be granted any significant regularity in its operation, then its continued functioning in popular reviewing practices and in more general debates about media and popular culture presents an obstacle to any attempt at reconceiving culture in more complex terms. Moreover, this obstacle emerges not simply in the context of practices of *aesthetic* assessment. As Catharine Lumby has effectively shown through her discussion of a series of complaints raised about a ‘sexist’ advertisement for a watch, the discourse regulating reviews of popular culture may take a *political* guise too.²⁰ In her analysis—which has since been summarised by Alan McKee in his account of cultural studies’ available methods of textual analysis (the significance of which point will become apparent shortly)²¹—Lumby reproduces the print advertisement, run by a Sydney jeweller, and then recounts the series of highly critical responses it prompted from the reading public (and even from federal politicians) when published in a major Australian magazine. The advertisement, as McKee subsequently describes it, ‘shows a woman wearing a flimsy satin dress. A man is standing behind her, his hand reaching down inside to fondle her; she is reading a book, and reaching down between her legs at the same time.’²² The ensuing responses, which Lumby reviews in detail, denounced the advertisement as ‘blatantly sexist’,²³ criticising particularly the advertisement’s patriarchal ‘objectification’ of women, as can be seen in the following complaint submitted to the Australian Advertising Standards Council:

It is the most offensive advertisement I have ever been subjected to. It conveys the dangerously misleading message that women condone and enjoy being molested by men and that this behaviour is completely normal. It objectifies women, demeans women and advocates sexual harassment and abuse, which is absolutely unacceptable. I am disgusted by this advertisement and feel that printing it is yet another crime against women.²⁴

As Lumby notes, ‘anybody who reads newspapers, watches television or listens to the radio will recognise this critique as feminist’.²⁵ To that extent, arguments or analyses such as the above amount to a kind of popular ‘political’ criticism of popular culture. From one

point of view, this kind of criticism aims to undermine the patriarchal oppression of women by challenging representations of women that perpetuate gender stereotypes or express sexist views of women as 'sex objects'. By the same token, such complaints about the dangerous 'message' conveyed by the jewellery advertisement (or by 'sexist representations' more generally) are premised on precisely the assumptions about textual power and audience passivity that inform the supposedly superseded 'mass culture' view of popular culture. As with the aesthetic form of the 'high/low' distinction, in other words, a particular view of the 'oppressive' or 'negative' effects of popular culture which is largely attributable to the assumptions underpinning an 'outdated' academic discourse can be seen as maintaining significant currency in contemporary public discussions of popular culture.

What bothers Lumby about the complaints she discusses is partly the way that the kind of 'feminism' they articulate happily lends its social and rhetorical power to campaigns for censorship mounted by 'the kind of social conservatives who want to abolish abortion, criminalise homosexuality and dismantle feminism'.²⁶ As McKee observes, moreover, the complainants' enabling assumption of 'patriarchy' 'as an all-powerful and ultimately inescapable force ... renders it very difficult to imagine representations of women that would be acceptable to a rigorous feminist analysis'.²⁷ To that extent, the continued allegiance to the conception of popular culture which informs that 'critical' discourse has the effect of *disempowering* entire communities (in more ways than one) precisely at the moment it aims to spur the most vocal criticism in the name of those communities. Against this view of the deleterious effects of 'sexist' images, then, Lumby insists that 'reading images is never simple' and that images are 'affected by what frames them'.²⁸ Working from such a position Lumby proposes a counter-reading of the jeweller's advertisement, one which focuses on the depicted woman's control over and self-pleasure in the 'sexist' act being depicted: 'for one thing, the woman is reading a book—an activity she doesn't seem eager to hurl aside just because hubby's home from the office. For another, she's touching *herself*—behaviour which suggests there's a little more to their sexual relationship than penetration'.²⁹ Notwithstanding arguments that the advertisement depicts 'women' as 'objects ... entirely at the disposal of men',³⁰ therefore, Lumby focuses on the image's depiction of female sexual *activity* and thereby appropriates it for the purpose of thinking about the complexities of sexual politics.

While Lumby's point about reading images is hardly unprecedented in cultural studies (not even at the time that she writes), it leads her to ask a series of questions that are extremely important for my attempt to think about cultural studies and practices of cultural criticism:

Why insist on reading images like the Sydney jeweller's ad as demeaning to women? Why teach women to read images in a way that makes them feel embarrassed about themselves? Why not encourage them to make creative readings of images and to appropriate

and reinvent female stereotypes to their own advantage? Continually stressing the patriarchal reading of an image which can be read in other ways is hardly empowering for women. In fact, it's a strategy which cedes an awesome power to images and to the people who produce them and which denies the ability women demonstrate daily to use imagination, critical resistance and humour in negotiating images and life in general.³¹

Lumby's questions shouldn't be taken as an excuse to ignore or otherwise deny the role of advertising and commercial media industries (though not only those industries) in generating and seeking to profit from a particular economy of sexuality. Undoubtedly, there's much to be reflected on and challenged with regard to the contemporary dynamics and flows of visibility, desire, power and capital, for instance, which have made 'representing' the female body a particularly lucrative business for some. And certainly cultural studies' research into the politics of culture, having largely moved on from the representationalist paradigm which informs Lumby's complainants, is in a much better position to analyse such dynamics and flows in ways that are more nuanced, self-reflexive and finely-tuned to plays of difference than has been the case in the discipline's early years. But what strikes me as particularly interesting about Lumby's questions is the way they invite us to reflect on the role that cultural studies *pedagogy* may play in reproducing or transforming the particular modes of 'critique' and 'interpretation' that are available to 'popular' or 'non-academic' forms of cultural criticism—to those forms of cultural criticism, in other words, that are regularly practiced in public debates about culture. Specifically, Lumby's questions are couched in terms which bring into focus a material point of connection between a set of concepts and practices of interpretation and a particular practice of disseminating those concepts and practices: 'why *teach* women to read images in a way that makes them feel embarrassed about themselves?'

Rather than presuming that audiences are always capable of appropriating cultural texts in 'resistant' ways, in other words, Lumby's questions hint at the way in which a particular critical discourse—in her case, an institutionalised form of 'feminism'—functions so as to regulate and *mobilise* the kinds of responses audiences routinely display. Furthermore, implicit in her suggestion that audiences may be 'encouraged' to 'make creative readings of images' and to 'reinvent female stereotypes to their own advantage' is an understanding of audience activity not as a capacity that is either innate or uniformly distributed among media audiences but rather as a potential to be *cultivated* in such audiences by a more or less formal pedagogy. Beyond merely demonstrating (be it theoretically or empirically) the present 'semiotic capacities' of media audiences, cultural studies' relation to audience activity would, on this account, take the form of disseminating skills for conducting critical-creative responses to and readings of cultural texts.

If it appears that cultural studies has for many years been participating in precisely such processes of cultivation—by reconceiving its pedagogical objectives in terms of cultivating cultural and critical literacies, for instance—and has done so partly for the purpose of transforming conventional understandings of culture and politics, I want to suggest that this may not be the case. Certainly, given both Hartley's and Hunter's accounts of the institutional *limits* to the effectivity of cultural studies, the apparent success of cultural studies in breaking with its earlier assumptions about the divisions of culture warrants further thought at least. With Hartley, that is, I suspect that a certain 'critical commonsense' and the 'lines of demarcation' it reproduces in cultural studies' pedagogy is partly responsible—largely through the way that different disciplines operate 'to dictate the primacy of certain questions'³²—for the continuing influence of or allegiance to a putatively 'outdated' view of popular culture.

The constraints of space prevent me from providing much more than the vaguest gestures towards delineating the institutional, pedagogical divisions that beget and reproduce this 'commonsense'. Such divisions would include the ongoing critical distribution of popular texts via the language of genre—*notwithstanding* the lip service paid to arguments that genres are impure, non-determining, impossible to delimit and define, and so on.³³ They would also include (after Hartley) the disciplinary divisions between 'the aesthetic disciplines (Film and Literary Studies)' and a more 'materialist' form of cultural studies, as well as the concomitant (albeit not quite isomorphic) distinction between cultural texts and their industrial contexts.³⁴ Although the emergence of 'postmodernism' and the reinvention of cultural studies throughout the 1990s would suggest that these divisions no longer structure the analysis of popular culture according to the evaluative (not to mention dismissive) positions represented by Adorno and Leavis, my suspicion is that the so-called acceptance of popular culture as a legitimate field of study represents merely a transformation of certain critical prejudices into the apparently 'neutral' techniques or imperatives of a discipline.

For instance, would it be conceived as utterly *essential* that industrial systems of mass production and distribution be discussed in a unit of study on feminist literature? Would it be required that the reading of Modernist literature be discussed *first and foremost* in terms of 'consumption'? Would it be suggested that the *only* way to identify different readings of Romantic poetry is to examine the historically and geographically dispersed readings produced by concretely situated readers? Would a textbook on postcolonial literature be required to depict the texts it discusses as displaying a set of generic features authorised by the historical development of a tradition and reproduced in each new instance of that tradition? If the answer to all these questions is not an emphatic 'yes', then why is it seemingly *imperative* that such approaches and terminology be adopted when it comes to studying popular media

texts? Undoubtedly, the extent to which such approaches and terminology still appear as 'radical' or 'unconventional'—or at the very least as 'optional'—in the context of literary studies indicates just how much that discipline, even *after* 'the post-structuralist turn' and *notwithstanding* the laudable efforts of literary theorists, remains organised according a particular logic of culture. By the same token, the extent to which it is still rare for the study of popular texts to be organised around the objective of exploring and generating creative or strategic readings of such texts—the kinds of creative interpretations, for instance, which literary studies regularly attempts with regard to 'proper' literary texts—is extremely suggestive of how much cultural studies has internalised and sublimated the critical prejudices which define its pasts.

The point can be made by briefly considering the way in which the question of interpretation is presented within cultural studies pedagogy, particularly via the pedagogical force of introductory texts on the study of popular culture. Such texts provide at best an equivocal measure of the way in which the study of popular culture remains delimited by something like a critical commonsense—not least of all because they are shaped (partly) by the conservative force of academic publishing and its associated logics of profit and accessibility, and since they may in any case be integrated and used within specific university units in ways that aren't reducible to the pedagogical rationale they articulate. However, insofar as the machinery of academic publishing is plugged into academic and pedagogical frameworks (via academic authors themselves, market research, peer-reviewing of book proposals and manuscripts, etc.) and as textbook-assisted teaching remains relatively commonplace in university education, introductory accounts of the study of popular culture not only present a limited gauge of how the positivity of the field is constituted on the basis of an array of disciplinary divisions but also factor in as a material conduit for the reproduction of such divisions and their concordant delimitation of pedagogical practice.

For instance, such introductory accounts routinely present cultural studies' general turn to 'the reader' and its raising of the question of interpretation in two dominant ways. The first of these takes the form of the 'ethnographic' challenge to the idea, presumed by earlier mass culture methodology, that texts are fixed in their meaning and determining of the way they are interpreted and used.³⁵ This way of introducing the question of interpretation regularly cites David Morley's and Ien Ang's well-known work on television audiences and Janice Radway's study of romance fiction readers as demonstrating that interpretations made by 'actual' audience members and readers not only differ from interpretations generated by mass culture frameworks but also vary significantly across studied populations. From these studies emerged, on this account, a theoretical imperative to develop and refine concepts of 'audience activity' and a methodological imperative to acknowledge and demonstrate the plurality of possible interpretations of media texts. While the latter imperative was

mostly answered by a new generation of audience researchers, McKee's overview of textual analysis methodology explains how this 'turn' to the reader led to the development of 'an important new approach to textual analysis'.³⁶ McKee initially attributes the emergence of this 'new approach' to Bennett and Woollacott's famous study of James Bond novels in terms of 'reading formations', and he goes on to describe this approach as 'one which did not attempt to work out the single correct interpretation of a text, but which looked at context in order to work out likely interpretations (of which there could easily be more than one)'.³⁷ And as an update to earlier accounts of this history of methodology, McKee goes on to situate Lumby's argument about reading images as an example of this 'new approach'.

In positioning Lumby's analysis as an example of 'work[ing] out likely interpretations', however, McKee ends up *reducing* the range of approaches to textual analysis by downplaying the *creative* work involved in that analysis. This is to say that there is a sense in which Lumby's reading of the jewellery advertisement isn't a 'likely' one at all—especially considering the discursive power of that form of feminism which animates and legitimates a blanket charge of sexism. Rather than presenting a likely interpretation of the text in question, then, Lumby, drawing on a (still) fairly esoteric set of ideas about sexuality, power and representation, actually *composes* a *counter*-reading of that text. Lumby doesn't so much 'analyse' the text, in other words, as 'create' it, giving it alternative significance by way of a particular reading framework which hopes to approach culture as an ethico-political question. And to the extent that her creative reading might seem more sensible (or at least more sensitive to the possibility of alternative interpretations) than the dogmatically 'feminist' readings she seeks to defuse, Lumby's counter-interpretation helps to show up the fact that these latter readings are creations of sorts too. 'Likely' interpretations, in other words—and even textual 'analyses' which seek to work out likely interpretations—are always more or less compositions or creations: products of particular sets of reading techniques and protocols as they are activated in relation to given texts (and inter-texts) within specific interpretive events. Such 'interpretations' are undoubtedly regulated in various ways—by the continuing functioning of the 'high/low' discourse or by the protocols of a particular critical discipline, for example—which thus reduces their potential plurality, but the force of such reading conventions is far from complete or uniform.

McKee's emphasis on 'likely' interpretations is a gesture perhaps made with the aim of maintaining contact with the ethnographic privileging of 'actual' audience responses or, possibly, with the sociological focus on regularities or rituals framing consumption. In any case, McKee is by no means alone in foregrounding the task of *analysing* existing (or likely) interpretations over the possibility of *creating* interpretations—or of creating, more to the point, *counter*-interpretations.³⁸ Nor, of course (in case this needs to be said), is he or any other author of introductory texts to be 'criticised' for recounting a widely accepted view of textual

analysis. But in the context of questions about cultural studies' success in transforming prevailing conceptions of culture, and hence about attempts to focus cultural studies pedagogy on the development of critical literacies, this particular way of accounting for 'the reader' in the analysis of popular culture can be seen as problematic, if not counter-productive. For it reproduces a particularly pervasive division of culture—between cultural criticism and cultural production—one which continues to delimit rather than expand the range of possible responses to and uses of cultural texts. To put it simply: being able to recognise, explain or argue that texts can be interpreted in multiple, even unexpected ways is not the same as being able to *produce* multiple, even unexpected interpretations. Nor is possession of a capacity to do the former a guarantee or sign of the ability to do the latter.

In contrast to accounts of the ethnographic challenge and the focus on likely readings, the practice of interpretation-as-creation is engaged in a second way of introducing interpretation within cultural studies pedagogy. This form of engaging 'the reader' entails introducing students to different theories of textuality and interpretation, drawn largely from the 'traditions' of hermeneutics, semiotics, psychoanalysis, post-structuralism, and so on. Tellingly, such theories tend to be introduced as such in 'the aesthetic disciplines' (literary and film studies) rather than in cultural studies 'proper'—on account, most probably, of the historical centrality of forms of aesthetic (or reflective) judgement within the former as against the forms of political (or determining) judgement which have shaped the latter.³⁹ Without much regard to their largely philosophical origins, the ideas extracted from these traditions are regularly presented as theories of *interpretation*—as resources for 'reading' or for 'making sense' of cultural texts in different ways. Accordingly, such theories are regularly approached in terms both of their 'content' (ideas about texts and interpretation) and of their delineation of 'technique' (a practical method for interpreting texts). To that extent, this pedagogical form of raising the question of interpretation not only emphasises the *role* of the student-as-reader in the 'production of meaning', thereby demonstrating the plurality of possible interpretations of cultural texts, but also provides a context for developing *skills* in creative interpretation through the 'application' of different theories to particular texts.

By the same token, the extent to which these interpretive exercises are regularly tied to the disciplinary contexts of literature and film (and thus to the specific procedures and logics privileged in each of those contexts) inevitably reduces their immediate applicability for the purpose of pursuing creative criticism of popular narrative. This is the case not because these theories are 'vulgarised' in their translation from philosophy to film and literary studies and then to the study of popular culture, but rather because the 'interpretation' of popular texts—even in its specialised or apparently value-neutral form—continues to be *materially organised* according to a logic which is significantly distinct from the logics of literary and film aesthetics—to a logic, that is, whose locus is the theories and methodologies

of the 'mass culture' tradition. While contemporary literary theory has thoroughly complicated the traditional conceptions of authorship, literary meaning, interpretation, writing, spirit, tradition and so forth, which together form the logic of an earlier discipline of literary studies, such theories are rarely directed—in pedagogical contexts, at least—at the specific constellation of concepts which have historically defined the analysis and evaluation of popular art. In popular reviewing practices, these concepts tend to be evaluative and organised diametrically: innovation v. formula, aestheticism v. commercialism, realism v. escapism, art v. entertainment, and so on. Consequently, exercises in literary theory often have little purchase on practices of assessing popular culture, since the latter are rarely organised according to the literary logic that the former engages. To the extent that such practices *do* activate a logic of 'art'—say, when a particular film is reviewed as 'innovative' and 'challenging'—the effect of such a practice is to *remove* the text from the general category of (formulaic, commercial, escapist) popular narrative rather than to trouble the 'high/low' distinction as such. Seemingly by contrast, contemporary cultural studies prefers to adopt a more descriptive, non-aesthetic logic of popular culture, speaking of genre as a reading formation, of industrial contexts of production and reception, of the contradictory and resistant pleasures of consumption, of variable social uses of popular texts, and so on. But insofar as that logic marginalises questions of aesthetics, it too (at best) fails to connect with popular reviewing practices, or (at worst) actually confirms the logic of mass culture by way of its reduction of the question of culture to a matter of sociological analysis.⁴⁰

Cultural studies has, to be sure—and ought to have—many uses, many forms, many objectives, many techniques, and not all of these need be oriented towards some overriding goal of transformation. But cultural studies' relative disconnection from popular reviewing practices may be disconcerting for any cultural studies program that is concerned with transforming widespread conceptions of culture. Notwithstanding cultural studies' advances from the positions on popular culture held by Adorno and Leavis, the mass culture prejudices and 'high/low' distinction would appear to have significant currency outside the specialist practices of cultural studies research. One response to this problem might be to follow Lumby's example by aiming to enhance audiences' and readers' abilities to 'appropriate and reinvent' popular texts in ways that are empowering and sensitive to the range of possible uses, interpretations and pleasures people may take from such texts. In this respect, the pedagogical objective of cultivating critical and cultural literacies would appear to present a strategy for undertaking a limited displacement of the ideas about popular culture that circulate throughout a broader public sphere. To increase its effectivity to the greatest extent possible, however, a cultural studies pedagogy premised on such a rationale may need to be organised around the development of strategies for interpreting popular culture *against* the logic of

mass culture. Indeed, and at the risk of appearing overly mechanistic, such a pedagogy may need to engage with and transform not just the apparently dated theories and methodologies of mass culture but also the received ideas and embodied techniques of 'interpretation' which define or constitute the popular art of reviewing popular art.

Such a strategy can't be reduced simply to a populist affirmation of popular culture. Rather, it would entail the dissemination of skills for conducting critical-creative readings of and responses to popular texts, skills which may be distinguishable from the more specialised sets of analytical skills that are privileged in current approaches in cultural studies to the question of interpretation. While it is possible that the dissemination of such skills already takes place in ad-hoc ways in otherwise disconnected pedagogical contexts, there seems to have been little attempt to organise or reflect on such practices as part of a formal pedagogy, and no real attempt to consider the ways in which the particular question of the popular may necessitate a specific set of exercises, distinguishable from those which tend to be advanced in the form of 'literary theory', to develop such skills. Pursuing the cultivation of such skills doesn't mean that the teaching of popular culture must be reduced to a narrowly 'textualist' approach to the study of popular narratives. After the 'post-structuralist turn' and cultural studies' ongoing theorisation of the politics of consumption, such a 'return' to an unproblematised aesthetics would make little sense in the context of most cultural studies programs today. On the contrary, the move to legitimise the study of popular culture in terms of creative criticism is a step towards finding new ways of linking the kinds of observations able to be drawn from critical political economy (for example) to the 'lived practice' of reading or otherwise engaging with popular texts. Exploring the possible insights that the disciplines of creative criticism may offer to the popular art of reviewing popular art, in other words, may enable the study of popular culture to more effectively introduce its critical theories of cultural consumption and to connect them to popular practices in a more meaningful, critical way.

ROBERT BRIGGS currently teaches in Communications and Writing at Monash University (Gippsland) and has published numerous articles on post-structuralism, cultural criticism, and popular culture. <robert.briggs@arts.monash.edu.au>

-
1. John Hartley, 'Popular Reality: A (Hair)Brush with Cultural Studies', *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, vol. 4, no. 2, 1991, p. 11.
 2. Hartley, p. 16.
 3. Ian Hunter, 'Setting Limits to Culture', in Graeme Turner (ed.), *Nation, Culture, Text: Australian Cultural and Media Studies*, Routledge, London and New York, 1993, pp. 140–63.
 4. Hunter, pp. 143, 158.
 5. Ken Gelder, *Popular Fiction: The Logics and Practices of a Literary Field*, Routledge, New York, 2004, p. 11.

6. Gelder, p. 40.
7. Gelder, p. 1.
8. Gelder, p. 1.
9. Gelder, p. 75.
10. Gelder, p. 17.
11. Gelder, p. 1.
12. Gelder, p. 12.
13. Gelder, p. 11.
14. Gelder's focus is restricted, of course, to the field of popular literature. His discussion as whole, though, raises the question of the popular more generally, especially considering the extent to which the fields of film and popular music occupy a similar position as popular fiction in relation to the apparently contradictory logics of art and commerce.
15. On the question of the relations between a concept of 'formula' and a concept of 'genre' in the analysis of popular narrative, see Robert Briggs, 'Don't Fence Me in: Reading beyond Genre', *Senses of Cinema* <www.sensesofcinema.com>, no. 27, n.p.
16. Section 11 of the *Classification (Publications, Films and Computer Games) Act*, 1995, lists 'the literary, artistic or educational merit (if any) of the publication, film or computer game' (p. 20) among the 'matters to be taken into account' by the Classification Board when 'making a decision on the classification' of the cultural product in question. The tag 'if any' speaks volumes about the continuing force of the 'high/low' distinction and its very material effects on the reception of particular cultural texts.
17. Janice Radway, 'Reading Is Not Eating: Mass-Produced Literature and the Theoretical, Methodological and Political Consequences of a Metaphor', *Book Research Quarterly*, vol. 2, no. 3, 1986, p. 11.
18. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith, Tavistock, London, 1972, p. 49.
19. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan, Penguin, Hammondsworth, 1977, p. 138.
20. Catharine Lumby, *Bad Girls: The Media, Sex & Feminism in the 90s*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1997.
21. Alan McKee, 'Textual Analysis', in Cunningham and Turner (eds), *Media and Communications in Australia*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, 2002, pp. 62–71.
22. McKee, p. 69.
23. Cited in Lumby, p. 13.
24. Cited in Lumby, p. 3.
25. Lumby, p. 3.
26. Lumby, p. xv.
27. McKee, pp. 69–70.
28. Lumby, p. 8.
29. Lumby, p. 8.
30. Cited in Lumby, p. 5.
31. Lumby, p. 8–9.
32. I borrow this phrase from Radway, 'Reading Is Not Eating', p. 11.
33. See for instance Scott McCracken, *Pulp: Reading Popular Narrative*, University of Manchester Press, Manchester, 1998. McCracken repeats precisely such platitudes (p. 12) before going on to discuss six different genres of popular fiction. See John Storey, *Cultural Studies and the Study of Popular Culture*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 1996, for a different but related technique of distribution, which insists on dividing the cultural field into different media (fiction, television, film, etc.). While different media are undoubtedly organised according to varying institutional logics, etc., this emphasis on medium-specificity at the expense of a less disciplined (as it were) exploration of narrative generally not only overlooks the extent to which non-specialist engagements with media texts are regularly organised according to more general logics of narrative and aesthetics, but also plays down the potential significance and effects of trends towards media integration (in terms of economics, technologies, consumption practices and so on).
34. For an indication of how such divisions of culture are reproduced in Critical Political Economy approaches to contexts of production and consumption—even in those approaches emerging from post-structuralist forms of historical materialism—see Robert Briggs, 'Film Factories? A Review of Genre and Contemporary Hollywood', *Senses of Cinema* <www.sensesofcinema.com>, no. 29, n.p.
35. See for example Storey, *Cultural Studies*, pp. 9–53.
36. McKee, p. 69.
37. McKee, p. 69.
38. See for instance Fiske, pp. 62–83; Storey, *Cultural Studies*, pp. 9–53; and Dominic Strinati, *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture*, Routledge, London and New York, 1995, pp. 47–9.
39. Those cultural studies introductory texts organised according to 'theoretical traditions' that do exist tend to privilege either a quasi-philosophical approach, which examines such theories in terms of the logic or structure of the 'concept' of culture-in-general that they formulate, or a quasi-sociological approach, which thereby foregrounds the analysis of cultural objects according to their 'place' within a broadly dispersed social and cultural field. For an example

of the former see John Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*, Longman, New York, 2001; for an example of the latter see Strinati, though he seems to want to oscillate between these two tasks (pp. xvi–xvii). For both of these approaches, the particular ‘literacies’ involved or cultivated are much more strongly connected to the specifically *academic* competencies of researching, of learning, explaining and applying *technical* knowledges,

than they are to popular or non-specialist practices of reviewing popular culture.
40. Although there is no space to defend the point here, it is not hard to see that these ‘analytical’ strategies bear a strong resemblance to their ‘non-specialist’ counterparts and thus to the general logic of mass culture. Compare, for instance, the focus on industrial contexts of production and reception with the charge of ‘Hollywood commercialism’.