Culture high and low

Why study popular culture? Basically because it is by definition the main cultural expression of our time. Like television, still its primary medium, it is everywhere. We who live in developed nations (well almost everyone) live our lives around and partly through it. It’s a bank of pleasure and meaning. It’s the mirror in which the culture recognises itself. It peoples the world: for many, celebrities and fictional characters are like distant acquaintances. It draws national – and international – communities together, dotting conversations and private and communal memories. For some (and just about everybody at some time or other) elements of popular culture become an obsession or help form an identity. What would society be without television, sport and pop music? Different hardly catches it. And of course it is also a huge business. In the last instance, popular culture demands teaching and research, just because it’s so there (Lewin 2001).

Yet relations between academic disciplines and popular culture remain contentious. To begin with, academic writing about popular culture risks pomposeness, especially when it claims progressive clout for the popular, as it often does among those called ‘cultural populists’. Who hasn’t been embarrassed by the pontifications of cultural theorists on hip hop say, or Dr Who? The reason for this is not, of course, that academic work is too rigorous and profound, and popular culture too trivial for the two ever to be compatible. Or that popular culture is so accessible that academic commentary of it is redundant. Rather, inside popular culture itself, intellectual self-regard is a systematic target of deflating ridicule. Since, in most of its forms, popular culture is committed to immediate pleasure, it wraps its seriousness in entertainment. However powerful and insightful it might be, its first requirement is – generally speaking – to be consumable now.
Popular culture also unsettles the academic bias towards weightiness because its works and styles tend to be current for so short a time. The academy is structurally attuned to what endures, and it is itself a key instrument of cultural preservation. And those forms of academic inquiry that are determined to extract an uplifting, progressive, political cue moral message from their topics have a commitment to the future that popular culture never lacks. It does not help that academics are, by virtue of their job, middle class and connected to authority, while a great deal of popular culture emerges from, and is addressed to, those who have no post-compulsory education. Indeed, it is often, at least on the surface and especially in genres such as hip hop or punk, anti-authority. All this means that much of the most insightful work on popular culture is closer to the culture itself than any academic theorists can be. Journalists such as Greil Marcus, Anne Powers or Lester Bangs generally write better about it than academic theorists. Much academic writing strains to join the popular but it doesn’t often (ever) happen. (See the introduction to Jenkins, McPhearson and Sztattick 2002 for a recent manifesto of academic popism, for a good discussion of the structural divisions between fans and academia, see Hills 2002, 20.)

**Popular culture in history**

When it comes to popular culture, just as elsewhere cultural studies can use a historical sense of its object, so let me present a micro-history of relations between high and low culture. Students are often amazed to learn that the division as we know it is quite recent. It did not exist when a culture of the aristocratic elite, based on a classical education and patronage and centred on the classical (i.e. Greek and Latin) canon, was counter-posed by a people’s culture which was largely non-literate and centred on non-commercial carnival, communal sports, festivities and rituals (Stallybrass and White 1986). From the mid-eighteenth century, that structure was transformed so that two literate cultures existed, one elite, the other not, both increasingly commercialised and available in the vernacular (i.e. in living rather than dead languages). In this situation, elite culture became organised around distinguishable aesthetic principles, which included the notion of culture’s responsibility for the provision of moral guidance, culture’s capacity to harmonise and fill the self, the individuality of the work (art or literature) and the genius of its greatest producers (Guilbault 1993).

Popular culture, on the other hand, became organised around the market, with little legitimation and few constraints on production, except those imposed by censor- ship. It provided pleasure and entertainment. Insofar as these were seen to require passivity and moral vacuousness, it was feminised (Heyssen 1986). And yet the cultural hierarchies and divisions characteristic of the first half of the twentieth century were not fully established: snippets of Shakespeare were still presented in the popular theatre of the mid-nineteenth century for instance (Levine 1988). Modern divisions really became set when, late in the nineteenth century, high culture was defended by professionals in reformist or oppositional terms. Aesthetics such as Walter Pater began defending art without claiming any social usefulness for it all. Among what was described as the ‘art for art’s sake’ movement, art, at most, allowed its fans to live intensely, hard in the moment. It provided a mode of radical sensation (Pater and Phillips 1986 [1873]). More conventionally, the so-called ‘apostle of culture’, Matthew Arnold, thought of culture not simply as ‘the best that is known and thought’ but as a form of criticism that could be directed against Puritanism, commercialism, aristrocratic brutality and arrogance, as well as vulgarities of any kind. It could also enable people to see ‘the object in itself’ (Arnold and Collini 1993 [1869]). Soon more and more of the education system was devoted to propa gating culture in these terms (Arnold was himself an ex-school inspector).

These defences of high culture, if anything, increased strong demand for it from working-class men and women (Rose 2001). Certainly there was little sense that the division between elite and popular cultures was itself a form of social domination. This allowed governments and philanthropists to win widespread approval when they funded high cultural institutions: schools, libraries, concert halls, art galleries and museums, in order to disseminate hegemonic forms of civility, as well as to increase communal cultural capital generally. This intervention, however, had the effect of consolidating cultural divisions and tying high culture to middle-class respectability more tightly. And that in turn paved the way for another twist in our story: an experimental and (sometimes) subversive avant-garde split off from established high culture, often by appropriating elements of the popular. We can take the nineteenth-century French Romantics’ celebration of puppets and popular-theatre characters such as Pierrot as an example (Storey 1985).

By 1970 (when cultural studies was emerging) this whole system had begun seri ously to break down under the pressure of the extension of audio-visual culture (radio, film, television) as well as of the extension of secondary and post-compulsory educa tion. At this point, defenders of high culture began to look like a beleaguered minority whose powers, although still in place, seemed uncertain and defierence. On the other side, what we might call popular-cultural consciousess (a reconstitute familiar isity with performers, conventions, texts) became the basis for more popular culture reception and production, allowing for a much more varied and self-reflective popular culture. At the same time, texts that combined high and low elements became commonplace once again. Clear binary differences between high culture and popular culture began increasingly to break down. The modern canon was dispensed so that today, publishers such as the Oxford University Press can label reprinted Zane Gre novels as classics even though they belonged to the mass culture of their time. Likewise museums regularly present exhibitions on past (and sometimes present) mas
or commercial culture and non-canonical artists. It is harder to come up with examples from 'below' that incorporate high cultural merits or references, but, as we shall see, a large body of culture today exists in a zone between or reaching into both high and low (to use those loaded terms).

At any rate, by the sixties the high culture canon had lost certain of its functions. It was no longer required to maintain social hierarchies (society had stronger means for that) or to guide contemporary cultural production, which began once again to 'appropriates' of adapt, rather than to defer to, the canon. What effectively organized the popular/high division was, on the one hand, the distinction between old, or historical, culture (cultural heritage) and contemporary culture, and on the other, the distinction between old art media (namely literature and fine art) and audiovisual and new media.

These new and mixed cultural preferences begin to change the way people grouped around their cultural preferences. Jim Collins uses the term 'taste cartographies' to describe the 'ways critical distinctions are now being made in reference to different configurations of taste, value and class affiliations' (Collins 1995, 188). It's a concept that allows us to see how, in contemporary culture, tastes are more than tastes for objects. They assemble and connote the groups who have them, even if many (but by no means all) taste groups are still linked to class or sexuality or ethnicity or gender. Yet as tastes became less connected to class in particular, the sociabilities they stimulated became increasingly important as identity markers and life practices — most of all for that majority whose sense of themselves was formed around these very tastes.

This is of course a summary of events in the West, but similar (if not identical) logics now work outside the West, especially in Asia. Conservative ideologues in both Japan and China have appealed to traditional arts requiring training and scholarship as a bulwark against Americanized mass culture, and — to take just one example — since the seventies Korea has appealed to its own high culture against commercialized Japanese popular culture (animation, karaoke, computer games, popular music, melodrama).

Meanwhile teen sociality in particular is organised around shared tastes within the various strata of commercial culture, which regularly involves appropriations of imported forms, against the supposed values of their elders.

Mass culture

Traditionally academicists have distinguished between popular and mass culture. Popular culture meant culture of and by the people (if not merely folk culture as such). Mass culture meant culture produced industrially on a mass scale. But that distinction has lost its force. In cultural studies, the term 'mass culture' has fallen out of use because it was generally a term of abuse (see Denning 2004, 97—120). It denoted an exploitative, mechanical, empty culture, one often thought to pedal cheap fantasies and to pander to impossible desires. That kind of theory failed to account for nuances, differences and qualities within the domains that it named, and did not even pretend to share the aesthetic pleasures and benefits mass culture provided for its audiences. One important moment in the lifting of the negativity that surrounded the notion of 'mass culture' (thus allowing it to be reframed as the popular) was Fredric Jameson's recognition (riffing on the German theorists Ernst Bloch and Herbert Marcuse) that much industrialised culture contained a 'utopian' charge. It may have offered food for fantasy and with fulfillment but by soliciting its audiences' 'libidinal investments' it also provided glimpses or tastes of what the good life could be. These glimpses or tastes might even motivate political energies. Or so the argument went (see Jameson 1992). The problem with jettisoning the concept of mass culture once and for all is that no all popular-cultural products are equally popular. Some are much more widely consumed than others. Skateboarding is a form of popular culture, but not as many people enjoy it as enjoy watching or playing football. Heavy metal is popular culture but it isn't anything like as popular as hip hop (of which some genres are much bigger than others anyway). So it remains useful to think of something such as mass culture as a culture that accesses audiences across a variety of cultural sectors and is part of almost everyone's cultural literacy in a particular society. It's a sub-sector of popular culture, where we think of popular culture, simpay, as all culture that is not regarded as, or does not consider itself, elite culture. (And it is worth remembering that elite are popular cultures, as opposites, need each other to be defined in those terms.)

Cultural populism and the canon

Cultural studies' embrace of popular culture does possess a certain political valency albeit one that full-blowm cultural populism exaggerates since, as we have seen, its acclamation of popular culture fits the logic of contemporary capitalism rather than stands against them. The political force of cultural studies' affirmation of the popular is closely tied to a 'critique-of-the-canon' argument that goes like this: the canon is that select group of texts, artworks, etc. conventionally regarded as representing the highest achievements of the culture, and often discussed and disseminated as such in educational and high-status cultural institutions. But a culture organised around highly selective canons is unable to ascribe full value to what lies outside its canon. The canonised does not have more absolute value than the non-canonical — it simply that the particular criteria, attitudes and training that it implies form the culture of the dominant classes.

Those, for instance, who are profoundly moved by great works of art, who have strong opinions about why some canonical works are greater than others and who want to study them in depth and communicate their findings and opinions are not so much wrong (there is no way of telling right or wrong in this context) as failing to address a bigger and much more importantly more complex picture. They are ignoring the two-way flow between class and...
value in that its consumption is in itself a form of participation in a public sphere — our collective identities are formed through our immersion in the popular. But the most common argument is to point out once again to the links between subject positions and cultural tastes and to maintain that a taste for the canon is at base the expression of particular identifications, closely linked to class and ethnic stratification.

In fact the debates over academic cultural populist seem to me limited and repetitive, since they do not have a clear enough sense of the forces that are transforming popular culture. These forces have been expressed at various points in this book, but it is appropriate to rephrase them at this point.

**Popular culture**

Popular culture has become segmented into a myriad of forms, genres, audiences, tastes, styles and purposes, so much so that it cannot meanfully be talked about as a monolith. While, as we have seen, some so-called ‘popular culture’ is produced on mass (and has certain of the characteristics of mid-twentieth-century mass culture: that cultural critics of the period complained about), a great deal of popular culture is produced for relatively small numbers of people who are familiar with, and more or less passionately interested in, the genres involved. And a great deal of popular culture — such as hip hop — is produced for relatively small numbers of people who are familiar with, and more or less passionately interested in, the genres involved. Yet, at the same time it is increasingly finding new links between sectors and ways to market one set of product in terms of another. Branding across formats has become increasingly important with the rise of comics, computer games, books, films, music CDs, music videos, TV shows and all the rest. It is increasingly finding new links between sectors and ways to market one set of product in terms of another. Branding across formats has become increasingly important with the rise of comics, computer games, books, films, music CDs, music videos, TV shows and all the rest.

Certainly popular culture is riddled with art niches, in the sense that it produces work which resists immediate pleasures and satisfactions; which is experimental in the sense that it expresses unusual and thought-provoking feelings and messages; which is often conscious of the history of its particular genre; which requires some familiarity with a wider field than with the piece of work itself. These terms — to repeat — there exist thousands of movies (David Lynch), scores (Radiohead or the Magnetic Fields), comic books (Chris Ware), even television shows (The Sopranos), which hybridise high and low forms. Indeed, art values are not or being democratised but are breaking into new spheres as they colonise fields such food, car culture, wine and fashion (at the same time as art itself is becoming more aestheticised). These values may be class markers and the products in question are available to the privileged, although not exclusively to them.
some as gross and as demeaning to women, although (jumping ahead in time) it is also a move in the sexy perco dance style which caused an uproar in San Juan and looks likely to hit the US mainland (this is written early in 2004). Because, on the other hand, a dog is man's best friend and a favourite of white Hollywood family movies, where no family is a real family without one. Because dogs (like Snoopy) are dagged. And because a man impersonating a dog is comic (if a little embarrassing) rather than threatening (Gilroy 2000, 204ff.). Snoop disseminated a trope from the streets in which abstraction was turned against itself so as to attract the widest possible audi- ence market. As Jamaican crossover ragga master, Elephant Man, put it in his recent song 'A Bad Man': "Here's to all you dogs the world over!"

Popular culture also creates more or less inexact notions of tradition and innovation: there are neo-modern, neo-classical and a plethora of retro styles (just thinking of decades, there's a taste for each - thirties, forties, fifties, sixties, seventies, eighties, styles you name it). Of course, there is nothing new in the anchoring of taste formations in the past: neo-classicism, which shifts its meaning and its content across generations in the period between the Renaissance and the mid-twentieth century, is arguably the key taste/style formation of modern Western culture and has always involved elements of 'invented tradition'. Neo-classicism has generally meant order and harmony in turbulent times, and under modern capitalism all times are turbulent, so that one function of taste and style has been to indicate a historically transcendent calm and stability. But in contemporary popular culture, neo-retro is neither a principle of order nor even of nostalgia: it organises fashions which know themselves as such, solic- iting complex modes of reception which involve memory, irony, regret and pastiche.

To point to popular culture's rich and innovative tonal range, however, is not to say that popular culture does not have real limits and problems. But in most cases these are confined to specific occasions or genres and can't be denominated the downs as a whole. One of popular culture's more systemic limits is that of obsolescence. In it, individual works or acts do not usually acquire prestige and aura because they are rare and exist at a distance from those who appreciate them, but on the contrary because certain names and texts are everywhere, because they have a culturally saturating fame. It is true that the objects of specific and limited tastes (Lou Reed, South Park) can acquire considerable prestige among the highest taste moutiors at a particular moment, but they have, even at their period of greatest acclaim, nothing like the massive popularity (or circulation at any rate) of Madonna or The Simpsons at their peak. Yet all prestige and appeal is acquired only in the process which will exhaust it: a certain point repetition and celebrity turn into boredom and satiety, and the object is transsheded into final uncoolness and obsolescence, awaiting its call into history's dustbin from which it will be retrieved (perhaps) as retro or nostalgia. Only premature death can stop this process it seems: Elvis, Marilyn, Lennon, James Dean.
Cultural value and taste

All this goes to show that it is still difficult to think about popular culture from within the academy without returning to the question of value. But there remains a great deal of confusion about this issue. In making at least a start in clearing it up, it is helpful to distinguish between value, quality and taste, since these are different, if interconnected, categories that have often been jumbled together.

Value is the (supposed) abstract worth of a cultural object or genre or medium in relation to other objects, genres or media. It is fundamentally an economic concept, and classically has been divided in two. Objects have use value (their value as measured by their usefulness) and they have exchange value (their value as measured by what they can be traded or substituted for, usually via money). From this perspective 'cultural value' is really a kind of metaphor since basically culture has neither use nor exchange value as these work in economics. Insofar as value can be ascribed to it, cultural objects possess exchange value rather than use value since the implication is not, for instance, that high culture is more useful than popular culture but that it should be substituted for it. Certainly there are no objective standards for measuring cultural value, nor does culture possess a mechanism like the market to constrain quantifiable cultural as against monetary value to objects through the mechanism of supply and demand.

On the other hand, quality is the worth of a cultural object as judged from the institutions from which it is produced or consumed in relation to the autonomous features of its medium. All cultural zones contain works of different quality; indeed all cultural production seems to involve quality judgements, since producers constantly reorient their own attempts on the way to finishing a piece. And within cultural zones and genres, there is widespread if by no means total agreement about quality. Every object within a zone or a genre may be different and unique, but it is not completely different and unique, so quality judgements are possible. If sense one were to argue that, say, Britney Spears, Vanilla Ice and Boy George were better than, say, Alice Keys, Public Enemy and David Bowie then they would be regarded generally as being either provocative, perverse, ironic or ignorant.

Each media has different criteria of 'quality'. The term itself is used most in industrialised culture (its usage for culture emerges out of industry itself as in 'quality control') such as the music and most of all television businesses. Geoff Mulgan, for instance, has listed seven distinct senses of the term 'quality' as used within the television industry (Mulgan 1994, 88-115; see also McGuigan 1996, 45-47) which we can reduce to four: (1) quality as an expression of professional production skills, a concept which provides room for producers' creative freedom; (2) quality as measured by consumer response to programming; (3) quality as judged in terms of an aesthetic specific to television; and (4) quality as judged by television's capacity to meet ethical functions, notably truth-telling and cultural diversity. It may be that similar criteria
could be produced for less industrialised cultural sectors: the literary novel for instance. Nonetheless, in aesthetic domains where quality cannot be measured by the capacity of an object to perform a specific task there remains structural uncertainty about quality judgements – as there would be in the case of point (3) listed above.

Finally, there is taste. Taste is the expression of an individual’s personal cultural preferences. It has an important history since it is so closely related to the development of modern privacy and liberty – let’s briefly rehearse this history so as to deepen the story told above about relations between high and low cultures.

In the West, and particularly in France, taste and ‘polite’ culture become important as society splits more thoroughly into state and civil spheres. As the state takes over the government of life from the church and its care of souls, first by taking control of the police and army, civil society becomes the realm of public institutions: newspapers, books and journals as well as theatres, clubs, taverns, coffee houses, libraries, gambling halls, art galleries, sports grounds, shops, music halls and so on. The old notion of the ‘private’, which referred to those disallowed access to the public sphere (as in an army ‘private’), disappears since these new forms of public life (state and civil) connect to everyone, or at least in theory.

In this process, the private becomes a protected zone for ‘opinion’ (as theorised by the philosophers John Locke and later Immanuel Kant) and, crucially, in terms of our interests, for taste. At the same time, liberal notions of private economic and legal rights to property, personal labour and capital begin to organise modes of production (i.e. capitalism). By ‘liberal’ I mean: (1) that individuals are defined in terms of their relation to property, even if only their ownership of their own body and its labour power, and (2) that society is conceived as the aggregate of formally equal individuals whose rights to liberty are paramount. Only in the early nineteenth century does the concept of the private become primarily associated with gendered domesticity, as the workplace and the home begin to split from one another and a notion of ‘personal life’ as distinct from work appears (Warner 2002). But the liberal individualism of nineteenth-century capitalism, although it further damaged social consensus, did not provide markers of hierarchy in the way that the old aristocratic system had.

Taste, rather than opinion, helped meet the need for new archaic canons of good taste allowed liberal culture to exist as an ordered, graded structure. As we have seen, it also disseminated civil docility. The individual’s right to their own taste (and its free expression), then, is deeply embedded in the liberal theory behind modern capitalism since good taste is key to mediating between the social and economic inequities that capitalism produces and the democratic and egalitarian theses underpinning that theory. The decline of taste as a marker of hierarchy and its loss of social function is partly a consequence of capitalism finding other ways of constructing hierarchies (basically through the extension of an extraordinarily subtly graded consumer market) and partly by egalitarian colonising the cultural domain after its success in formal politics.

Once the era of good taste disappears it is not just that more objects can appeal to more people but that criteria for taste proliferate. Today sometimes it seems as if just about any signifier whatsoever is available to hang a taste on: How rough and gutsy is it? How smooth? How ironic? How sincere? How hot? How cool? How technos? How natural? How in your face? How laid back? How loud? How quiet? How weird? How chic? How queer? How straight? How heavy? How light? How deep? How much glitter? The old signifiers of aestheticised taste – beauty, harmony, order – have lost meaning, but have not of course disappeared. And the more choice one has between taste criteria and objects, the less that choosing one particular criterion or object disables access to another, the more relaxed it is possible to be about taste’s liberalisation. If I can have access to both Henry James and South Park, why diis one?

The problem with much thought about cultural value is that it either confuses value with quality or lets taste override both, as if the truism ‘everyone has their own taste’ is an argument against value or quality as such. Of course, in practice taste, quality and value do intermesh, but value is the most fragile of the three concepts since, at base, in relation to culture it can only be used metaphorically. After all, and to reiterate, commodities have value, cultures do not. In the end taste triumphs over value, but quality distinction remains unsurpassable.

Bourdieu

Thaus it is that the most often cited and sophisticated theories of cultural value, Pierre Bourdieu, is really a theorist of taste. His basic argument in his major work, Distinction (1984), is quite simple and already familiar to us in broad terms: modern society is characterized by a fragmented taste, one in which the systematic differences between high and low culture are not so clear-cut as in the past (i.e., the ‘legitimate’, ‘middle-brow’ and ‘popular’) whose particular tastes, interests, knowledges and skills are not acquired contingently. Nor do these cultural differences and gradations exist because high culture is ‘better’ (more civilized, profound, subtle, mature, etc.) than low culture. Rather (in an argument we know) gradated taste differences have a particular social function: they help reproduce these classes divisions they map onto. For Bourdieu, tastes are a key constituent of cultural capital, and everyone has more or less cultural capital. They also exist within and organise what he calls a ‘habitus’, that is, the set of dispositions, preferences and classifications that people are not necessarily aware of holding and which often seem ‘natural’, but which are continually acted upon and acted out, even, for instance, in the way we move and care for our bodies. A habitus is the way that cultural capital is regulated and lived, and it bridges the material conditions of existence (class differences in terms of work and money) and the signs and practices through which different groups place themselves within the social hierarchy.

Individuals from the dominant class inherit more cultural capital than those from the dominated class, just as they do more economic capital. They learn to appreciate
and contextualize high culture. And they learn the rules and discourses that regulate and legitimate it. In particular, they acquire the skills to recognize the aesthetic domain as aesthetic rather than simply as entertainment or as technical accomplishment. They learn to take a disinterested and meditated attitude to art; appreciating it as an end in itself. Such cultural capital can be transferred to economic capital in various ways (and vice versa), but it is especially important for those Bourdieu calls the ‘dominated fraction’ of the dominant class, who make up for their relative lack of money and status by acquiring relatively more cultural capital.

There are a number of problems with Bourdieu’s argument, and the most telling have often been placed within cultural studies and sociology (see Collins 1995, 1998; John Hall 1997; and, best of all, Frow 1995). Most obviously, Bourdieu’s theory relies on too tight a fit between class and taste. As we have seen contemporary culture is marked by a proliferation of taste groupings based on a variety of social distinctions (gender, ethnicity, locality, generation, etc.), and in some cases on none at all: groups of like-minded fans may be formed across relatively wide social differences (a taste for fishing, for instance, or for ballroom dancing). This means that the link between high culture and class domination is weaker than is claimed.

Nor does the link between taste and class have the same force in all countries: a large-scale survey in Australia, designed to test Bourdieu’s thesis there, demonstrated persuasively that, while certain cultural preferences are very class-specific (providing piano lessons for children for instance), in the main the correlation between class and culture was looser than Bourdieu supposed (see Bennett, Emmison and Frow 1999). One reason for this is that it is likely that culture is a less powerful marker of class difference in Australia than it was in post-war France (much of Bourdieu’s research for Distinction was carried out during the sixties), or for that matter almost anywhere in Europe and North America. And it is questionable whether Bourdieu’s theory works outside the West: in China, perhaps; in Oman, say — much less so.

Bourdieu’s theory also assumes that most people in society recognise the same overarching cultural standards; that they have a shared sense of how much or little cultural capital each possesses. This is doubtful: it is clear that, while just about everyone believes that there is more status in owning a Mercedes-Benz than a Toyota, or that a nest egg of a million dollars is better than one of ten thousand, not everyone believes that appreciating classical music or the English literary canon is a mark of status. For many (and not just those in ‘dominated’ classes) that is simply a sign of being a nerd or a wanker. Cultural capital circulates in restricted channels.

On the other hand, Bourdieu underestimates the degree to which tastes can move across different groups. Some tastes begin in small and elite groups and become relatively mainstream (classical music crosses over onto the pop charts that happen every few years, and over the long term the taste for impressionist and post-impressionist art increases). Others move in the opposite direction (the cultural power of Elvis-style rockabilly was at first arbitrated by the tastes of black and white teenagers from the USA’s south-west for instance). Indeed age lends almost everything, including mass cultural objects, charm to a discrete set of collectors and/or the aesthetically minded. Different groups (and individuals) may value the same activities and objects but in different spirits: Abba fans for instance love the group for all kinds of reasons, and with widely different degrees of jokiness, from zero to lots. And that too isn’t accounted for in Bourdieu’s theory.

In sum, while Bourdieu’s theory represents the most rigorous attempt to connect patterns of social domination to cultural tastes, its ambitions are not quite met. Perhaps most disappointingly of all — what does Bourdieu have to say to individuals who love, say, Daft Punk, Kate Bush, Franz Kafka and Dr Dre? Can their passion be interpreted simply as a (unconscious) strategy to acquire cultural capital or to reconcile themselves to a lack of it? (Clearly having a wide range of tastes is a sign of cultural capital.) What about pleasure? Understanding the world? Political engagement? Can’t tastes carry these too? What about all the uses, buzzers and social connections that come with cultural participation and consumption, and which can’t be thought of just as efforts to acquire prestige in a zero-sum competition where winners balance losers? Cultural studies, one might say, begins where Bourdieu leaves off.

Further reading

The nature of culture

As Raymond Williams noted in his seminal essay 'Ideas of Nature', the concept of 'nature' is one of the most multifaceted in Western discourse, 'culture' being a weak competitor in this respect (Williams 1980a). Indeed, the two words have a twinned history: before it came to mean the institutions, processes and meanings through which we make sense of existence, 'culture' meant something like cultivation, that is, productive human intervention in nature. At any rate, nature exists in what the anthropologist Marilyn Strathern has called a 'matrix of contrasts' — that is, it's defined in opposition to, or in correspondence with, a number of very different categories.

Nature, defined, first, against artifice and technology. In those terms it becomes the domain of what is not under the control of human agency, or even what is pre-staged or marked by human agency. The immediate difficulty with this definition is that today what exists as 'nature' is almost wholly a direct or indirect product of long human manipulation so that, on this planet, there is almost no pure nature in this sense.

Nature too can function as a synonym for life, since it can also be limited to what belongs to biology rather than to physics or chemistry. It exists as the array of living things rather than all things or, what has almost but not quite the same sense, as what is 'organic' as against what is 'inorganic'. (The rise of organic foods has altered the meaning of 'organic', which previously was used to denote simply what was living, but which now means something like 'what has not been produced by recent agricultural technologies'.) This means that to describe the world out there as 'nature' is to smuggle in a certain life force into the universe, as if the universe itself were animated. This corruption of an animated universe is common across many cultures.

Very differently, nature is also defined against supernatural. Here it becomes basically everything that belongs to this world as against the world of gods and spirits. As such it includes rather than excludes what is artificial or technological. Of course, from the point of view of hard modern rationality, supernatural only exists as a human belief and it, therefore, part of nature anyway. From that point of view, then, there is ultimately nothing but nature.

Nature, as distinct from supernatural, was once conceived as a world of anarchy, chaos, death. This was the case, for instance, within orthodox Christianity, for which the fallen world of nature and labour awaited redemption upon the Day of Judgement. It was also the case for all political theorists (such as Thomas Hobbes) who believed that the close human beings were to their natural state the more brutality and disorder there would be. In a different formulation, Horkheimer and Adorno, in their classic Dialectic of Enlightenment, argued that modern social domination (the oppression of the poor by the rich in particular) needs to be understood as the consequence and endpoint of that human fear of, and desire to dominate, nature which has always driven the production of technology and rationality (Horkheimer and Adorno 1988 [1947]).

But more and more, since the seventeenth century, at least for secularists, nature has been regarded as an order of rational laws and processes, as well as (under the sway of Romanticism) a site of innocence and recuperation. Nature as Eden.

Rational and natural laws may be more or less harmonised in the most recent versions of living nature — Darwinisms and neo-Darwinisms — regard the principles that drive organic nature as ordered but not benign. Their nature is conceived in terms of a slow, cruel history in which the struggle to survive under fierce competition determines outcomes. Darwinism turns biology into a form of history, and has the capacity to turn history into a form of biology (as it is for those who believe that social relations are produced by evolutionary forces). Recently, too, under the influence of Norbert Weiner's cybernetics, nature has been conceived not as ordered by rational laws or as a retreat, but as an 'autopoietic' or self-regulating system (see Hayes 1999).

Nature has also become a universal normative concept. We speak of 'natural rights'; we denounce acts as 'unnatural' (famously, until the gay liberation movement, same-sex acts). In ordinary language, phrases such as 'naturally' and 'it's only natural' are used, almost without thinking, as explanations, defences or as praise. The distinction between what is 'natural' and what is 'artificial' almost always designates the latter. Nature as a norm is not the same as nature at life itself, but this difference is routinely overlooked. Modern environmentalism in particular merges them, as if protecting a nature conceived as artifice and technology's opposite is in the interests of nature and life as universal norms.

More specifically, ecologically thought appalrs to a number of versions of nature. Of these the 'quasi-aesthetic' and the 'ethical' (as we can call them) are probably the most widely accepted, partly because the sense of pending global disaster that permeates much eco-politics is too terrifying and too insubstantial to enter the mainstream (Latour 2004). Quasi-aesthetic environmentalism aims to preserve species, wildernesses, etc.
norm for human beings. This Hegelian distinction asks us to think about history as the steady submergence of first by second nature, and for Hegel this was clearly to be regarded as progress. Second nature can have another sense too; it can describe the naturalisation of society and politics, the passing off of social or political constructs as natural. Perhaps the most common form of this is to think of the family as a fact of nature rather than of society, and then to model society as a whole in familial terms. The word ‘culture’ itself, with its historical sense of ‘cultivation’, has residually naturalising force: it is as if the formation of collectivities and individuals were like the cultivation of a crop.

Nature, then, is what the structuralists used to call a ‘cosmological signifier’; it performs different kinds of work in different contexts. Or to put this mother way, it promises to be something exterior to the social and cultural which might therefore frame and limit them. But nothing can be unproblematically exterior to the social and cultural, at least as far as what has meaning for us belongs to the meaning-giving process that is to culture. So nature is the outside of culture and society as that outside appears from inside, and in terms of culture and society.

Cultural studies’ relations to the meanings and cultural work of nature concepts are various enough but the discipline is structurally inclined to resist claims that nature really does exist as an external write-in in due The theory of Nature North American Landscape from Daisy to Exxon Valdez. There Wilson proposes a ‘restoration ecology’, which he conceives not as a process of maintaining nature in its pristine beauty but as a human mimicking of natural systems linked to a strong sense of the history of human–nature interactions (Wilson 1992). This line of argument has itself come under question as remaining too connected to romantic anti-capitalism (Why model ourselves on any concept of nature at all?) (Neil Smith 1986), but since Wilson’s nature is more an imagined world to be imitated than a ground for action or preservation, it is hard to accuse him of naturalism as all. Nature for him has become thoroughly part of society and culture, but remains capable of regaining a certain collective idealism.

In fact cultural studies is in a strong position to reframe the cultural and social effects of environmentalism. Thus in a number of works Andrew Ross has criticised the uses to which notions of ecological scarcity and interconnectedness have been put...
(Ross 1994, 16–17). He wishes to critique the argument that natural resources are becoming exhausted and that a slight event in one place (a cow's fart) can trigger a larger event (a drought) half a world away – arguments which lie at the heart of some strands of eco-politics. As far as Ross is concerned, such claims often lead to exhorta-
tions for personal ethics of asceticism and environmental responsibility, and a vague sense of global citizenship, rather than to a clear-headed analysis of who is actually responsible for global over-consumption. He believes that the culprits are primarily big corporations in the over-developed world – a judgment that underplays the contrib-
tion of consumers to the problem. Ross also argues against environmentalism’s alliances with big business and indeed the military on the grounds of managing risk and damage. “Sustainable development” is often the rubric under which such alliances proceed. For him it simply enables business and the military to mobilise resources and dominate social discourse (Ross 1996b). Ross fears that, ultimately, environmentalism may allow the authority of science and expertise, especially as funded by multinational corporations, to govern more and more social and cultural activity.

But the most influential of cultural studies’ contributions to the analysis of nature has been the category of the post-human. Post-human theory affirms a human being no longer placed in nature conceived of as the opposite of technology and artifice. In her famous essay, ‘A Cyborg Manifesto’, Donna Haraway posed a trenchant critique of all forms of thought that fetishise nature and the organic (see Haraway 2003). She proposes a way of thinking that does not invoke nature as a value, or as any kind of tran-
scendental – outside the system – signaler at all. In particular she resists thinking of social bonds in biological terms – as ‘fleshy’. And she refuses to frame sexual rela-
tions as primarily reproductive, regarding the reproduction technology which is breaking the nexus between sex and reproduction as liberating (Haraway inDuring 1999). Had contemporary technologies of genetic implants and genetic code shifting existed when the essay was written, no doubt these would have been affirmed too, as opening up possibilities for human and social agency and experience outside natu-
ralised concepts of identity.

But Haraway is no simple technophile. She believes that the increasingly complex interrelations between human beings and machines need careful inspection and open and collective structures of control in order to present them intensifying rather than alleviating inequities of class and gender. In particular, as technology increasingly orders both work and leisure and the relation between them, the border between work and leisure is becoming less clear cut for many – which can be, to put it bluntly, either a good thing or a bad thing, depending on whether work becomes more like leisure (as it may for the privileged) or leisure more like work (as it may for the poor).

Indeed for both Haraway and Ross, who write as socialists, the key term seems to be labour. Haraway argues for the importance of restructuring labour processes in a post-human and post-nature world, so as to prevent a concentration of old forms of oppression. Traditionally, and particularly in Marxism, labour has been figured as the bridge between nature and society, as if nature becomes something else – society – only through work. And the amount of labour that a product required for production was the surest measure of its value. Of course that kind of labour is being downgraded as technology and information order production, and as services and cultural goods play larger and larger roles in national economies.

At any rate it is no accident that labour appears as a crucial category in thought about cultural and social relations to nature, since labour has always mediated the orders of the social and the natural. Indeed what Haraway and Ross remind us is that when cultural studies examines its prime object, culture – whether in the sense of leisure culture or the culture of everyday life, or culture as the struggle over life’s meaning – labour tends to disappear as an analytic category. This returns us to one of cultural studies’ (and this book’s) central concerns: can the discipline claim to be engaged if it lacks a firm analytic grasp of labour – the ‘natural’ basis of social existence – as it works in culture? Or does our deconstruction of nature actually mean that we have to rethink the category of labour too? If nature disappears into its ‘matrix of contrasts’ (as I am suggesting here), maybe it takes with it any concept that links work to a primal rift, natural, condition.

Further reading
CONCLUSION

What kind of work will they be doing? Where is cultural studies heading? It would be easy for me to list here a bunch of topics that seem to need more attention—religion, sport, ageing, travel and so on. Or to point to methodological gaps hidden in all those loose ends and contradictions: the need for more careful accounts of the relation between a passion for particular cultural forms and the articulation of critique; the need for more developed accounts of the ‘everyday’ itself for instance; a stronger sense of where cultural studies is headed within the Chinese or Islamic traditions. But I suspect that it is less meaningful to gesture at under-examined topics as they appear to me today than to wait for those entering the discipline to tell me what I am going to need to know in the years to come, and, indeed, what I ought to have known all along.

I began this book by claiming that cultural studies is an engaged discipline in three different senses. It takes into account the perspective of the marginalised and oppressed; it affirms cultural celebration and affirmation, and encourages fandom; and it aims to frame its analyses and critiques in relation to everyday life, or at any rate to life outside academia. All this without making knee-jerk negative judgements of any everyday life zone—not condescending neither to global export culture industries, say, nor to the local community arts hall. At the same time, cultural studies is an academic formation, somewhat reluctantly connected to the enterprise economy and neo-liberalism, which belongs primarily to the classroom and study. Furthermore it is a globalising academic field with a strong commitment to maintaining differences between communities and cultures on the grounds that the transnational imposition of common interests, values, styles etc. is a mode of hegemony. All this doesn’t quite add up. What’s the relation between critique and affirmation?

Between a commitment to the sociabilities and experiences of everyday life and academic work? Between the field’s transnational extension and its respect for difference? Between its embrace of enterprise and of marginality? In developing my understanding of cultural studies through a series of specific topics and chapters, my sense of the field’s loose ends, irresolutions, contradictions and frictions has, if anything, increased. But—and here’s the point—this is not to be thought of as a crippling problem or failure but rather as what energises the discipline, what keeps it fresh, exciting, open to the future. It’s what ensures that the new generations of students becoming involved in the field will be able to keep its projects going on their own terms.