When the University Went ‘Pop’: Exploring Cultural Studies, Sociology of Culture, and the Rising Interest in the Study of Popular Culture

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Abstract

This article examines why the study of popular culture has taken off as a subject of university course offerings and as a topic of scholarly inquiry since the 1980s. Placing the current explorations of popular culture in historical context, the article argues that popular culture’s study and studies in the sociology of culture can illuminate many of the classic concerns that animate sociology and related fields, such as the social organization and power of institutions, debates about public life and the formation of public opinion, concerns about the relationship between consumption, social status, and politics of the privileged elite, and the role of media in the development of social movements and in individual and subcultural understandings. The article considers how popular cultural studies are currently shaping the study of social life, and concludes by considering trends that might be encouraged among students and emergent scholars seeking to study in this area.

Introduction

‘Pop Ph.D.s: How TV Ate Academics’, a recent New York Times headline reads (Lewis 2006). In this news story, popular culture is presented as a surprising and somewhat questionable topic for a thesis. In another news story, similarly detailing the rise in the number of pop culture dissertations, a reporter muses about the sophisticated-sounding theses he has reviewed, noting sardonically, ‘Is the crime of academic jargon its unfailing ability to dignify nonsense?’ (MacCormaic 2004). In the USA’s National Forum, a conservative scholar bemoans the fact that ‘departments feature a multitude of courses on popular culture’ that have replaced the once-prominent study of the classics in literature and history, citing this development as illustrative of the fact that ‘American institutions of higher learning have deeply compromised their claims to academic integrity’ (Wilson, 1999). Such reports might give one pause. Is a rise in the study of popular culture indicative of a dumbed-down society, a failing of university life – perhaps a threat to Western civilization itself?
Of course, the worries of popular culture’s incursion into university life and the broader society are not new. Entertainment, some believe, is a mere distraction from the more serious matters of political discourse; even Plato cautioned that storytelling could divert attention of the young away from more virtuous pursuits. A few decades ago, Neil Postman scored a bestseller when he warned that we in Western society were at risk of amusing ourselves to death (1985), and in an oft-cited *Journal of Democracy* article entitled, ‘Bowling Alone’ (1995), Robert Putnam famously blamed television for the decline of public life in the USA. These and similar cultural analyses are not unrelated to the jeremiads that encourage hand-wringing over the decline of ‘civilization’.

Yet despite the continuing appeal of the narrative of cultural decline, the study of popular culture has been steadily gaining ground in universities around the world, especially since the 1980s. By the middle of the first decade in the new millennium, books related to the study of popular culture were not only receiving top awards in the International Communication Association and the American and British Sociological Associations, but had also been honored with the American Historical Association’s Herbert Feis Award, the Modern Language Association’s Katherine Singer Kovacs Prize and the Aldo and Jean Scaglione Prize, the Association of Feminist Anthropology’s Sylvia Forman Prize, and the American Studies John Hope Franklin Prize. In the last few years, centers, emphases, doctoral seminars, and majors in the sociology of culture have emerged in places such as Harvard, Princeton, Northwestern, Emory, and in other esteemed universities around the world, further adding to the field’s legitimacy and prestige. This prominence for the study of culture, and of popular culture within it, is suggestive of the ways in which scholars in various fields have explored through the prism of popular culture a variety of issues related to the economy, social movements, family life, urban and rural geographies, and differences of race, gender, socioeconomic status, nationality, and sexual orientation, among other things (Clark 2005b).

This article will argue that what has changed over time, within the university at least, is the way in which questions of popular culture are framed. In large part, this transformation of the view of popular culture came about through the work of feminists within cultural studies. Feminist scholars pointed out that popular culture itself had been delegitimated because its purchase and consumption often occurred in relation to the home, which was considered the domain of women (Huyssen 1986; see also McRobbie 1978). Stuart Hall, the influential Jamaican-born scholar in cultural studies, has noted that feminists created a shift in cultural studies, moving scholarship toward a closer examination of the everyday (1992). This initiated a rethinking of how power functioned, encouraging scholars to examine the connections between what happened in the private and public realms. Scholars therefore began to look at such things
as how people came to hold the beliefs about the world that they did, and how those beliefs were reinforced through their home lives and everyday practices, drawing connections between psyche and society, and between subjectivity and the subject (Lennox n.d.).

As a result of these and related efforts, researchers are now taking as a starting point the fact that, for better or worse, most people are immersed in a media-saturated environment in their everyday lives. Rather than devoting scholarship merely to questions of how bad popular culture is and for whom, therefore, scholars are asking: what role does popular culture play in everyday life, and in turn, how does it figure into such things as the formation of public opinion, the definition of social status, the mobilization of social movements, or the ability of institutions to maintain legitimacy? As questions about popular culture have turned to these matters, we in the university have witnessed a change in how the study of popular culture is perceived. In the USA, what was once a marginal field has increasingly become legitimized, recognized in sociological circles under the term ‘sociology of culture’. At the same time, the influence of what is known as British cultural studies has continued to expand beyond the UK, informing the rise of interest in everyday life that extends from sociology to history, anthropology, media studies, literary studies, area studies, and other fields in the humanities and social sciences.

This article therefore begins with a brief review of the study of popular culture appeals today, followed by a discussion of some definitions of popular culture. Tracing the study of popular culture from its earliest days, the article considers why popular culture has at times been dismissed as trivial, at other times viewed as dangerous, and finally, why it has recently come to be seen as a topic of legitimate interest and concern across a variety of scholarly disciplines and classrooms. Looking through the lens of some of the key questions that continue to animate studies of the sociology of culture, the article concludes with insights into the directions the study of popular culture seems to hold for the future.

We begin with a discussion of two interrelated aspects of popular culture’s study that have drawn people to this field: the ability of popular culture to both reflect and reinforce the emotions and identifications of individuals and groups, and the fact that popular culture, with its immediacy and hipness, has an inevitable connection with what students and members of society at large think of as what is ‘relevant’.

**Why study popular culture?**

*The study of popular culture is the study of emotions and identifications*

Popular culture appeals to our emotions and our processes of identification, making it a prime location for communicating significant ideals and ideas (see Kellner 1995; Livingstone 1990). This is a fact, of course, not lost on
the public relations and advertising industries. We may not like it when the White House works with Hollywood scriptwriters on stories that support their favored policies – and, in fact, many activists are agitation against these instances of direct incursion of politics into popular culture. Most of us also resent the flood of advertising and marketing that greets us at every point in our day in ever new and increasingly intrusive forms. There is no denying, however, that these efforts are undertaken out of a tacit acknowledgment in the role popular culture plays in informing public opinion. And the more these kinds of new developments come to light, the more likely we are to see students interested in studying in this area to gain insights into issues that transcend popular culture and embrace deeply important issues of how society is organized, how opinions are formed and prejudices maintained, what role consumption plays in social stratification, and what it means to be a participant in public life.

Popular culture is also a fundamental part of our social lives and our interactions with others; it provides an especially emotive language through which we communicate with others about those things that are especially meaningful to us (see Lull 1990; Morley 1980; Morley and Brunsdon 1999). When we talk enthusiastically about our favorite independent film, or when we choose not to talk about our favorite trashy television program, we do so both as a way to communicate something about ourselves and to join a conversation that is already structured with regard to a certain set of cultural expectations. It is through the stories, myths, narratives, sounds, and images of culture that we are able to make sense of our lives, both for ourselves and for others. By communicating with others through reference to popular culture, we are able to place ourselves socially and to ascribe meaning to our own actions. In this way, popular culture provides the framework through which public opinion can be shaped or maintained: it gives us a way to evaluate in the presence of others who we are, what we believe and do, and why. It provides us with a cultural repertoire, to use the language of sociologists of culture (Swidler 1986). Studying what becomes popular therefore gives us insight into why society is organized as it is, and what deeply held beliefs might need to be challenged in order to bring about change in its structure.

The study of popular culture is the study of what is relevant

There is little doubt that the study of popular culture has been on the increase for the past 20 years, both in the classroom and within academic research. As a major, communication and journalism studies saw an increase of more than 20% in the years between 1998 and 2004 alone in the USA (US Dept of Education, National Center for Education Statistics 2006). In many universities, students can now take courses related to cultural studies and the analysis of popular culture to fulfill humanities or social science requirements. The study of popular culture seems all the
more apparent as professors within various disciplinary traditions have found that students of philosophy are motivated to talk about Descartes after viewing The Matrix, political science students can be enticed into in-depth discussions of war and foreign policy through courses such as ‘The Hero in War Films’, and students will talk about race and class after listening to heavy metal and hip hop. Such efforts have inevitably introduced professors to new materials and, from a student’s perspective, such university courses employ what many students consider to be the language of their generation: that of popular culture and the media. Efforts to build a discussion around a popular cultural artifact therefore involve students in a way that creates a bridge from what is meaningful to them to what is meaningful (and perhaps more timeless) in the worlds of philosophy, the arts, or the social sciences. Rather than viewing the move to incorporate the study of popular culture into existing courses as evidence of the diminished value of traditional concepts, therefore, it can be argued that using popular culture as a touchstone makes traditional disciplinary concerns more accessible for a population of students that, for better or worse, need to be convinced of their relevance.

The increased interest in popular cultural studies since the 1980s, therefore, is related to the belief that the study of popular cultural artifacts can lead to insights into issues that transcend popular culture itself. After all, in today’s day and age, separating the worthwhile pursuits of politics, self-governance, virtue, and social organization from the realms of storytelling and popular culture may not be as easy as it might have once seemed. The film An Inconvenient Truth, part of Al Gore’s campaign to address global warming, won the 2007 Oscar for Best Documentary Feature and garnered Gore (and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) a Nobel Peace Prize, demonstrating the role that film can play in raising awareness and informing international debate. Young women in the Netherlands, France, and other European nations that allegedly support freedom of expression and gender equality face restrictions on the public wearing of the headscarf, on the one hand, and the wearing of belly shirts and visible G-strings, on the other, thus bringing debates about fashion, femininity, ethnicity, and appearance into the realm of public and political debate (see Duits and van Zoonen 2006). The fact that the United Nations and several nations are considering debt relief for Africa is in large part thanks to U2 singer Bono’s ONE campaign, coordinated largely through concerts and fan bases and a celebrity’s ability to schedule meetings with significant policy-makers. And of course, few would deny that some of the best US political insights in recent years have appeared not in speeches or on official Web sites but in the commentary found on The Daily Show, The Colbert Report, in left and right political blogs such as The Daily Kos and The Daily Dish, and in the many daily discussions about these sources of commentary that take place at work, in homes, in schools, and elsewhere.
Certainly, there are some examples of news coverage that keel to the trivial – no one would claim that Paris Hilton warrants the same amount of news attention as Ban Ki-moon, despite the fact that she has better worldwide name recognition (Ban began serving as the secretary-general of the United Nations in 2007). Yet can all of popular culture and the stories, objects, images, and sounds it circulates be dismissed as merely trivial? It is possible to argue instead that these examples of politics, public opinion, and popular culture are illustrative of a configuration of how politics is actually conducted, how public opinion is formed, and how societies are maintained: not in distinction from but directly through the realms of media and popular culture. Even a study of Paris Hilton is warranted, therefore, when we question why people around the world clamor for information about her, and what such interest says about us and about our conflicting expectations of public figures, status, wealth, celebrity, and sexuality. This kind of study, like many others in the areas of cultural studies and the sociology of culture, gives scholars insights into the relationship between psyches and societies, and gives students insights into how to connect issues of societal organization and power distribution with what they think of as relevant to their lives. In the next section, we consider how we came to think of the study of popular culture as we do.

**Defining popular culture**

Popular culture as a topic brings together three different, yet related, concerns: culture, the popular, and mass culture. *Culture* is the term used to denote a particular way of life for a specific group of people during a certain period in history. It also references the artifacts, narratives, images, habits, and products that give style and substance to that particular way of life. In an oft-cited discussion, Williams (1992) referred to culture as a ‘structure of feeling’; culture is something that informs the way that a group of people see and experience the world, even when they do not consciously recognize its collective organization or impact. *Mass culture* is a term that highlights the profit motive that directs the production of certain products made available for commercial sale. It refers to both these mass-produced products and the consumer demand for them that justifies their widespread production and distribution. The *popular* makes reference to ‘the people’, and *popular culture* therefore usually refers to those commercially produced items specifically associated with leisure, the mass media, and lifestyle choices that people consume. Items of popular culture can include products such as reading materials, music, visual images, photos, film, television, advertising, video games, celebrity culture, professional sports, talk radio, comics, iPods, and items on YouTube. But they can also include what we might call ‘high culture’: things such as live and performance theater, art, musical arrangements and performances,
and museum installations designed for popular consumption. Popular culture also refers to a seemingly endless variety of goods, including modes of transportation, fashion, toys, sporting goods, and even food. In short, popular culture is anything that can be successfully packaged for consumers in response to their desire for a means to both identify with some people, ideas, or movements, and to distinguish themselves from others (Bourdieu 2002).

Definitions of what constitutes ‘high’ and ‘popular’ culture also shift at varying points in history. As Lanier (2002) noted in his insightful book on Shakespeare, The Bard’s work was considered a form of popular culture during his lifetime, as theater was an accessible venue of entertainment for all. It was not until the end of the nineteenth century, with the canonization of literature and the organization of fields of study into disciplines, that Shakespeare’s works became equated with ‘high culture’. And yet still, as Lanier noted, most students come to literature classes today knowing something of Shakespeare’s work through what he termed ‘Shakespop’, or the interpretation of Shakespeare’s stories that have continued to be available through television, popular films, novels, and music, as well as in other popular cultural references.

In order to be successful and to receive widespread attention – in other words, to become a popular culture phenomenon – popular culture has to connect to something that holds meaning for people. Sometimes, popular culture expresses the zeitgeist of an era, speaking to deep-seated beliefs that are consistent with what we believe are the best qualities of our collective society. It is no coincidence that a rise in state support for civil unions and same-sex marriages would occur in the same era in which a film like *Brokeback Mountain* attracts A-list movie stars and achieves box office success. While not exactly comporting with a specific political agenda, the film’s appeal certainly was consistent with the growing desire on the part of many in the USA to embrace greater acceptance for gay and lesbian relationships even as past and current discriminations are acknowledged and mourned. But popular culture also reflects the unconscious, taken-for-granted views that we prefer not to admit to ourselves. Joseph (Pepi) Leistyna’s (2006) work on representations of class in American sitcom television, for example, points to the long-standing pattern of portraying lower-wage working-class men as bumbling, blustery, anti-intellectual subjects of humor, from *The Honeymooners*’ Ralph Kramden and *All in the Family*’s Archie Bunker to *The King of Queens*’ Doug Heffernan and *The Simpsons*’ Homer Simpson. Leistyna’s argument is that in this time of increased economic disparity, job loss, and employment insecurity, such depictions reinforce the notion that lower-wage workers are to blame for their own situation, and that people in lower-wage jobs are therefore distinct in their interests from working people with higher wages. In this case, the study of media representations might serve as a wake-up call to the fact that such negatively patterned representations...
cannot change until we work to change social reality. It is not so much that people are convinced by television, therefore, but that television’s entertainment value rests on its ability to articulate what we believe, without doing so in a way that threatens our very sense of who we believe ourselves to be (tolerant, humane, accepting, nonracist, etc.). Popular culture such as television and film, as well as novels, comedy clubs, fashion magazines, and more, are locations in which these contradictions and negotiations are constantly played out through narrative and representation. That is what makes them interesting as objects of study. We need to remember, as Robert Thompson, Director of the Center for the Study of Popular Television at Syracuse University, has pointed out, that ‘escapism and relevance are not mutually exclusive’ (Rose 2004).

Why is it that popular culture is associated with triviality, then? The roots of this approach go back to the earliest critiques of popular culture.

**Popular culture: Trivial or threatening?**

The phrase ‘popular culture’ first came into use in the English language in the early nineteenth century, when for the first time, it was possible to manufacture and widely distribute cultural products with relative ease and speed (Clark 2005a). Prior to the emergence of a capitalist market economy with industrialization, ‘the popular’ was a term with legal and political meaning that derived from the Latin *popularis*, or ‘belonging to the people’. The term was used as a way to draw distinctions between the views of ‘the people’ and those who wielded power over them.

In the past, therefore, the popular or the *popularis* was used in reference to the folk traditions created and maintained by the people outside of the purview of cultural authorities and away from the demands of labor. Once such folk-related practices became commodified, the phrase popular culture emerged as a term with a negative inflection. This happened as the working class that staffed the industrial landscape continued to grow in the nineteenth century, and as the bourgeoisie in industrialized Europe came to view the shared artifacts of working-class culture, now known as popular culture, as evidence of both their unity and their inferiority. Early criticism of working-class popular culture therefore emerged in a context in which the bourgeoisie feared an uprising similar to that of the French Revolution. Known today as the ‘culture and civilization’ tradition, its first articulation appeared through the writings of Britain’s famous poet, Matthew Arnold. In his book *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), Arnold argued that much of the problem of his generation lay in the emergent working class and their seeming refusal to adopt a position of subordination and deference to the elite and their culture.

The ‘culture and civilization’ tradition of popular cultural critiques found renewed expression in the writings of Frank R. and Queenie D. Leavis, who began writing about popular culture in the 1930s in England.
Believing that popular culture provided a dangerous distraction to responsible participation in democracy, they advocated that public schools engage in education about the ill effects of popular culture on young people. In their writings, the Leavises promoted a mythic ‘golden age’ of England’s rural past, in which they believed a ‘common culture’ (or ‘folk’ culture) had flourished. Their many treatises aimed to keep the expansion of commercial popular culture’s influence under control so as to maintain what they believed were the truly valuable aspects of England’s cultural tradition (Robertson 1987).

A similar strand of thought has long been a part of US approaches to popular culture. In 1957, Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White published *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America*, a collection of essays that bemoaned the supposed dehumanizing impact of popular culture. The Nazi regime of two decades earlier, it was then believed, had employed popular cultural propaganda with frighteningly spectacular results, and contributors to the Rosenberg and White volume brought that dark view to their concern that a passive audience in the sway of popular culture could be easily brought under the influence of a totalitarian government.

A fear of totalitarianism and propaganda animated the writings of scholars such as Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Leo Lowenthal, and Herbert Marcuse of the Frankfurt School, as well. Expatriates from Hitler’s Germany, scholars in the Marxist-informed Frankfurt School feared the manipulative potential of popular culture through the workings of what they called the ‘culture industry’.¹ Although often dismissed as overly pessimistic in that these scholars saw little potential for change in the relations between the privileged and the disadvantaged in society, these scholars in what came to be known as the critical school inaugurated several important streams of thought regarding popular culture. Particularly influential have been the ideas of critical theorist Walter Benjamin. Benjamin’s attention to both the mass production and ideological role of images in contemporary society has been influential in debates of art, politics, and postmodernism. Equally important, the critical school spawned the scholarly tradition of cultural imperialism, which came to prominence in the 1970s as it explored the flow of mass media across national borders. Latin American scholars of media and popular culture such as Antonio Pasquali, Luis Ramiro Beltran, Fernandez Reyes Matta, and Mario Kaplun, as well as Herb Schiller in the USA and Dallas Smythe in Canada, were concerned about the ways in which multinational media corporations were, through the organization of profit and commerce, able to dominate the development of media, and by extension popular culture and the commercial marketplace, in smaller and less wealthy nations.

In contemporary studies and critiques of popular culture, one often witnesses strains of thought from these earlier explorations, from a dismissal of popular culture as banal and threatening to Western civilization,
to a concern about its potential to narcotize and depoliticize, to the fear that Western popular culture’s ubiquity will undermine the authenticity and uniqueness of those cultures at some distance from Hollywood. By the 1980s, however, some scholars of popular culture began to question these often-undermodulated concerns about popular culture and the implications of its incursion into everyday life.

**Studying popular culture and everyday life**

By the 1980s, a vibrant body of scholarship on popular culture existed in both the USA and the UK. Much of it was rooted in what could be termed the late modern interdisciplinary approach to scholarship that took hold in and crossed borders between the humanities and the social sciences from the 1960s to the 1990s. During these decades, scholars across the university were responding to similar developments that questioned elitist cultural distinctions and sought to reclaim the experiences of those at society’s margins. Feminist, black, disempowered, and cross-cultural perspectives, combined with emergent theories of representation, text, discourse, and the social construction of reality, were central to the rise of reader-response theory in literary criticism, the ‘new history’ in historical studies, and ‘pop art’ that questioned ‘high culture/low culture’ distinctions. In the UK, scholars explored the role of media in social organizations and in group identity maintenance, especially among disenfranchised communities. In the USA, an interdisciplinary group of literary scholars, historians, social scientists, and other humanities scholars started the *Journal of Popular Culture*, which focused on the meanings conveyed in popular cultural texts.

At the same time, some in the social sciences were experimenting with what Geertz (1980) termed ‘genre mixing’, importing into sociological narratives experimental forms of writing from the humanities while also borrowing from the humanities the metaphors of game, drama, and text as means to analyze social life and organization. Seeking to consider these theories and their relevance for existing problems in differing disciplines, scholars applied them to local contexts, where, with the increasing availability and influence of popular communication in the leisure and work of everyday life, the media became an important and obvious area of investigation. Hence, one area of everyday life that received sociological attention was that of the news and primetime television.

In US sociology, the 1970s saw a turn to an interest in the production of culture, as scholars explored the processes by which people created, manufactured, and distributed popular culture. Several enduring works examined the media coverage of Vietnam and Watergate, exploring the role of the media in social movements, in public opinion, and as social organizations of significant import themselves. Tuchman’s (1978) *Making News: A Study in the Social Construction of Reality*, traced the widespread
trivialization of the women’s movement in news coverage of the 1970s. Gans’s (1979) classic *Deciding What’s News: A Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek, and Time* also proved influential. Based on a decade of observation and interviews at some of the most prominent news outlets in the USA, Gans’s work highlighted how professional practices, personal values, and the external pressures of deadlines and ratings contribute to the shaping of the news we receive. In *The Whole World Is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left*, author Todd Gitlin (1980) traced the news coverage of 1960s movements, arguing that leaders of these movements were at first largely ignored, and then treated as oddities, so that the news media ultimately participated in the containment of political change. Gitlin’s (1985) *Inside Prime Time* similarly explored the decision-making processes in Hollywood’s executive suites, providing insight into how television programs come to take the form that they do. These books were among the first in the USA to examine the role of the media in social and alternative movements, and have proven influential in many subsequent studies in this area.

Rather than focusing on media institutions, in the UK much of the early scholarship in cultural studies approaches to popular culture arose in response to the Frankfurt School’s pessimism and the Leavis’s bleak outlook on the demise of English high culture. In the 1970s and 1980s, scholars in cultural studies in the UK sought to demonstrate that audiences were not passive consumers of the products produced for them by the culture industries. Drawing on the earlier scholarship of British historical cultural theorists, notably Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart, and E. P. Thompson, cultural studies scholars such as Stuart Hall, David Morley, Charlotte Brunsdon, and those at the Birmingham school set out to demonstrate the importance of the ‘decoding’ rather than the ‘encoding’ processes of popular culture, to quote an oft-cited essay by Hall (1980).

Whereas much of the initial analyses focused on the British working class, McRobbie and colleagues (1978) insisted upon the importance of gender, giving rise to the argument that ‘everyday life’ in the home is quite different for men, who perceive the home as a place of leisure and for women, for whom the home is a place of work (see also Morley 1986). These interventions led to the development of television studies, an area of inquiry that has taken seriously how and why viewers consume such devalued forms of popular culture as soap operas and melodramas. Particularly influential was Radway’s (1984) *Reading the Romance*, which focused on the contradictions inherent within women’s readings of romance novels while also analyzing the ideological contradictions within the texts themselves and the economics behind the publishing industry that position women as readers and consumers.

During the Reagan and Thatcher era, sophistication in the use of positive rhetoric and symbolism to smooth over various social problems reached a new height. It was no wonder, then, that *The Cosby Show,*
number one in the US ratings throughout those years, came to be a subject for scholarly analysis of the role of imagery and narrative in public opinion. *Enlightened Racism: The Cosby Show, Audiences, and the Myth of the American Dream* of Jhally and Lewis (1992) demonstrated the thinness of American discourse on economic discrepancies and the relationship of race and class, ushering in a host of scholarly work on race, gender, class, and later representation of sexual minorities in American popular media.

Conversations between scholars of popular culture in the USA, UK, Australia, and Latin America in the 1990s spurred a rediscovery of the Frankfurt School, experimentation with various methods borrowed from anthropology and other fields, and a cross-disciplinary study to the topic that has continued to this day (see Ang 1995; Zelizer 2000). A renewed interest in cultural history, everyday life, and issues of visual representation, text, and discourse made cultural studies an especially attractive field for sociologists concerned with the ways in which specific narratives and representations contribute to maintaining power relations as they are (Griswold 2000). The 1990s also saw the translation into English of Habermas’s influential book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989), which helped social theorists to reconceptualize how the public realm has formed, and been influenced, by the rise of mediated culture. While in the pessimistic tradition of critical theory, Habermas’s work invigorated a conversation about public life and its relation to media and popular culture that would be studied in subsequent years across departments of sociology, political science, and media studies.

And finally, the English translation of what was to become another significant work, Pierre Bourdieu’s *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, first became available in 1984 and was widely circulated and commented upon in the 1990s. A key idea in the book is that there are two systems of social hierarchy: the economic, in which those with capital dominate, and the cultural or symbolic, in which those with ‘cultural capital’ are also able to claim higher status in the social hierarchy by defining and, hence, legitimizing social differences. The book offered a template for how those in sociology and media studies might relate the popular cultural taste preferences of various groups and subcultures in society to the organization of systems that hold in place and restrict access to what Bourdieu termed social, cultural, and economic capital. The International Sociological Association named *Distinction* one of the 10 most important works of the twentieth century, thereby further underscoring and propelling the growing legitimacy of the sociology of culture.

**New theories and methods, classic questions of social science**

In their 2005 edited collection titled, *The Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Culture*, the editors argue that the turn to culture within
sociology has been the result of several factors both within the field and in the larger society (Jacobs and Hanrahan 2005). First, commercialization and globalization have served as challenges to older systems of cultural authority, resulting in the dissolving of the academic canon and new challenges to such formerly authoritative cultural institutions as art museums. Second, studies of consumption have challenged older models of viewing culture as merely at the service of social systems, instead drawing attention to the ways in which it is constitutive of identity. And third, scholars interested in studies of popular culture have challenged the overly cognitive focus of earlier sociological analyses, introducing notions of aesthetics and emotions that are applicable to the classic sociological topics of class, gender, public opinion, and the professions (see Fyfe 2006).

Multiple methodologies are now embraced across various disciplines in the effort to provide analyses of the nuanced relations between power and agency, creation and consumption, consciousness and control, identity and difference, and individual and society in understanding the relations between popular culture, its consumers, its creators, and larger societal institutions. Moreover, as the conversation expands, sociologists such as Wolff (1999) have begun to argue that sociologists of culture need to enter the conversation on cultural studies. Sociologists can contribute understandings of social organization, institutions, social relations, and the production of culture to these various phenomena under examination, as Wolff has argued. And at the same time, those who have come to contemporary popular cultural studies from within cultural studies (notably from television studies) have begun to explore the relations between consumption and cultural production with more forthright attention. Jenkins’s (1992) description of the ‘participatory culture’, or the culture of fans who created meanings, identities, and subcultures out of television texts, has taken on new meaning in the context of an enhanced participatory digital realm. Jenkins’s (2006) book *Convergence Culture* therefore argued that through the Internet, audiences, producers, and content creators can interact as never before, thereby giving fans an active way in which to participate in the creation of entertainment and other media-related products.

Jenkins’s notion of ‘participatory’ culture has emerged as a key issue for many interested in active audiences, digital storytelling, and the role of fans in shaping mediated popular culture. Yet, a second key issue for those interested in sociology of culture focuses on the concerns of globalization, ‘glocalization’, and continued inequities in access to the digital realm. Scholars interested in these issues continue to raise critical questions of who gets to participate in the emergent ‘participatory’ digital culture, and how that participation varies along still rather traditional lines of socioeconomics and taste cultures. In some ways, both of these approaches are answers to the 1980s and 1990s critiques that charged that popular cultural studies were depoliticized, as both locate their interest in what is
occurring in the everyday while also linking those practices to larger systems of power and control.

In recent years, some who advocate the study of popular culture have sought opportunities to respond to the criticisms of popular cultural studies that were noted at the outset of this article. As Lumby (2004) has argued, ‘Where critics of cultural studies go wrong is that they think the quality of thinking is somehow predetermined by the cultural value of the object being analyzed’ (see also Levine 1997). Others have chosen to develop the conversation about the field’s worth among those already engaged in the study of popular culture, cordonning off worthwhile studies of popular culture from those they consider inferior (Grossberg 2006). Stuart Hall, a major figure in the development of the cultural studies tradition that has foregrounded the study of popular culture, famously had this to say about its study: ‘Popular culture is one of the sites where this struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged ... That is why ‘popular culture’ matters. Otherwise, to tell you the truth, I don’t give a damn about it’ (1981, 239).

Hall’s comments set the tone for a kind of study of popular culture that has been legitimated through its tone as politically informed. What it has meant to construct politically informed popular cultural studies, however, has been debated throughout the two-plus decades that followed Hall’s pronouncement. Whereas some scholars such as Fiske (1987) hoped that popular culture might serve as a platform for the resistance to mainstream thought, this idea has received a great deal of criticism. Instead, recent works in the study of popular culture have explored the social organization and power of societal institutions and the symbols they employ, the role of representation and emotional appeal within social movements, and the formation and maintenance of public opinion in relation to differing interests of class, race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and other identifiers (Alexander 2003; Bryson 1996; Clark 2003; Pescosolido et al. 1997; Peterson 1999; Williams and Kubal 1999). There are still strands of nostalgia for a Leavisite past and fears of a complacent public in some of the current work, just as there are some text-centric analyses of media products and some uncritical celebrations of audiences. Yet, much of the current focus of interest is situated within local contexts and organized around struggles for power, rights, and recognition: all areas that can be informed by classic concerns of sociology and undertaken through studies of popular culture.

Conclusion

Is there a new paradigm emerging in the study of popular culture? Clearly, the teaching of media, the sociology of culture, and the study of popular culture have been on the increase for the past quarter of a decade, and this interest crosses disciplines in a way that is especially attractive to junior
scholars and students. Conducting studies related to popular culture today is challenging, for it demands that researchers avoid the pitfalls of earlier popular cultural research (elitism, unmodulated pessimism or optimism, simplistic notions of the media or of its reception). But such studies invite scholars and teachers to work together to think through the specific ways in which representations, narratives, and objects can help us to understand how globalization is being played out in institutions, the professions, and in local contexts; how public opinion and even our ideas of what constitutes public life may be informed, challenged, or changed; and how patterns of purchasing and consumption can be related to identity formation, differentiation, social movements, and even nation-building. Moreover, as Grossberg has noted, ‘Cultural studies is committed to telling us things we don’t already know; it seeks to surprise its producers, its interlocutors, its audiences, and its constituencies, and in that way, by offering better descriptions and accounts – again, accounts that do not shy away from complexity, contingency and contestation – to open up new possibilities’ (2006, 6).

In recent years, those studying and teaching with media, sociology of culture, and popular culture have become increasingly concerned about the consolidation of the media industries. A new media reform movement has emerged that has sought to engage students in the process not only of thinking through questions of the consumption and production of popular culture, but also through the values of a diverse media landscape for the sake of democratic engagement and what some have called a cultural citizenship. Programs of media literacy today encourage an awareness of popular culture in everyday life that promotes a deep and contextualized analysis of media in society, followed by the encouragement of activism. This activism might originally take the form of praising healthy or protesting negative media images, or may encourage students to become involved in the advocacy of healthy and positive messages in the media. Then, students may move from consuming media and popular culture to gaining access to media to spread their own messages and articulate their own views of how things can change for the better. With the rise in such phenomena as inexpensive digital video recording and editing, blogging, and YouTube, encouraging students to see themselves as cultural creators and participants in public life is certainly possible. When such efforts are informed by a healthy understanding of public life and the role of emotion in engaging others, these kinds of expression may be a first step in helping students to see themselves as cultural and political citizens. Thus, I end with a challenge to young scholars that they continue to seek out new ways to address popular cultural studies to issues of wider societal import, seeking ways to have their scholarship inform debates over national and international policies, human rights and continuing inequities, and local concerns of governance, whether that references politics, privilege, or even parenting. That, ultimately, would be an excellent
way in which sociology could contribute to the study of popular culture in universities and beyond.

Short Biography

Lynn Schofield Clark is an interpretive cultural sociologist who explores the role media play in shaping claims to interpersonal, cultural, and religious authority. Her work is published in the Journal of Communication, Critical Studies in Media Communication, New Media & Society, and in several other journals and edited volumes. Her award-winning book From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, the Media, and the Supernatural (Oxford University Press, 2003/2005) explored how young people from varied (and no) religious backgrounds interpreted popular culture’s stories of the supernatural in relation to religious and spiritual understandings. She is also coauthor of Media, Home, and Family (Routledge, 2004) and editor of Religion, Media, and the Marketplace (Rutgers, 2007). Clark is Assistant Professor and director of the Estlow International Center for Journalism and New Media at the University of Denver.

Notes

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1 In a personal correspondence, popular music scholar Joseph Terry (personal communication, 2007) noted that whereas Horkheimer and Adorno (1972) employed the term ‘culture industry’, Schiller (1989) argued for the plural form, ‘culture industries’, as a way of signaling that the cultural sphere has been industrialized. Terry noted that Hesmondhalgh (2002) argued that the switch to the plural form notes the increased complexity in cultural production and helps to move analysis away from the rather monolithic understanding of culture propagated by the Frankfurt school, which has received a great deal of criticism.

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