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# An Interview with John Fiske

**S**ince the early 70s British cultural studies have examined the role of popular culture, and have produced some remarkable works that have influenced a generation of scholars in the English speaking world. Cultural studies have been so successful in North America in part because their rise coincided with the growth of other intellectual trends such as postmodernism, poststructuralism and semiotics. All of these theoretical approaches share with cultural studies a number of assumptions: a critique of the regulatory role that the traditional "canon" plays in national culture and university education, a distrust of the ideological assumptions of claims that underlie the distinctions between "high culture" and "low culture," and a need for an exploration of a new set of interpretive strategies for the reading of a cultural text which empowers the reader. *Border/Lines* collective member Joe Galbo interviews John Fiske, one of the leading exponents of the study of popular culture. Fiske is currently professor of communication arts at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and has taught previously in both Australia and Great Britain. He is also editor of the journal *Cultural Studies* and a prolific writer whose recent publications include *Television Culture* (1987), *Reading the Popular* (1989) and *Understanding Popular Culture* (1989). Fiske explains his views on popular culture and the important link between the understanding of popular pleasures and the development of a Left cultural politics. The interview took place last spring, a month before the much-touted conference, Cultural Studies Now and in the Future, at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The academic success of cultural studies in North America also carries with it a number of serious problems, as John Rodden suggests in his review, which follows. ♦

**Border/Lines:** Can you tell us a bit about your intellectual background?

**John Fiske:** The traditions that I came out of are really a mixture of structuralism and semiotics on the one hand, and Marxist critical social theory on the other. All my work is in one way or another concerned with problems of analyzing how it is that meanings circulate within capitalist societies divided by class, gender, race and all sorts of other divisions, and how we can trace these meanings at work. More recently, my emphasis has been much more on investigating those aspects of the circulation of meanings which might function as a de-stabilizing force in society and as an agent of social change.

Ten years ago, if you had asked me that question, I would have put the emphasis on the other side of the coin, that is, on how the circulation of meanings favours the status quo and works to stabilize society in the interests of a minority with power. Now my epistemological, and therefore political, interest has shifted quite diametrically, although I do not think that it contradicts my earlier work. I think it complements it actually.

Can you discuss the distinction between popular and mass culture?

Yes, at one level popular culture is necessarily made out of the products of various industries, the cultural industries in particular – television, film, music, but also the clothing industry, the car industry and so on. What the industries produce is mass culture, what the people produce out of mass culture is popular culture. All industrial products can be taken into popular culture, but most are not. It is a fallacy to believe that the commodities produced and distributed by the mass culture industries are therefore synonymous with popular culture. For a start, there is an enormous popular discrimination at work. Twelve out of every thirteen pop records fail to make a profit, eight out of ten movies fail to recover their production costs at the box office, although many will pick them up on video later, four out of five prime time television shows do not make it to the end of their first season. The industry does not know which of its products will be taken up and made into popular culture. If it did it wouldn't produce the rest. So it produces this repertoire out



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of which the various formations of the people make popular culture. What is often thought of and described as mass culture is the industrialized end of this process, the production of cultural commodities; some of these are taken up, re-worked, re-cycled, re-produced by the people, and what they are made, or re-made, into is popular culture. Popular culture is a culture of practices and processes, not like mass culture, one of commodities, nor high culture, one of texts and art objects. The distinctions are crucial ones to make.

But popular culture is also inscribed with an ideological message. How do "the people" evade or resist the dominant ideology?

I agree with you that the ideological and economic interests of the dominant are necessarily inscribed in the cultural commodity, or if you prefer it, in the text, *before* it is remade into popular culture. One has to look for the origins of evasion or resistance in the specific social circumstances of those who do this remaking, and it is here, in the remaking that resistance or evasion occurs. The life of a people under a capitalist society is deeply contradictory because the society that restricts and oppresses them also nurtures them and offers them the resources by which to live. Popular social experience is used to dealing with such contradictions. So to activate the popular television text or any other cultural text, a popular reading practice is used to negotiate the contradictions between the dominant ideology and popular meanings or popular interests. In fact, I would argue that there cannot be popular meanings or popular pleasures which are not formed in some relationship to a dominant ideology, whether that relationship be one of resistance, or one of escape or evasion. If the dominant is not there in some form to be opposed or evaded, there is very little popular pleasure involved. The *social* practices of the subordinated are shaped by their relationship to the forces of domination, and so must their *reading* practices as well.

How, specifically, can we go about analyzing popular culture?

I think there are at least two dimensions that we need to look at. The first is that of the so-called text, or cultural commodity, which should not now be seen as a singular art object, on the one hand, nor as a simply ideological agent, or an agent of commodification, on the other. Rather it is a resource. Some aspects or elements of the text will be activated, others will not. And while the structure of the text itself is not totally open – it is not a completely unstructured resource – that structure cannot determine finally which elements are taken up by which formation of the people and made into a



popular culture. So we need to analyze texts, not for their coherence in structure, but rather for their contradictions, their gaps, because that is where popular culture is made, in the contradictions, in the gaps, fractures and weaknesses of the text. It is a different form of textual analysis which gives priority to potential over actualization, the text as what it might be rather than what it is.

I think we also need some form of analysis of the socially specific practices or instances of this potential of the text being actualized, of the text being made meaningful and pleasurable by and for a specific formation of the people. It is a form of conjunctural analysis that brings together text, social formation, and historical conditions. Ultimately it is not the text which is the object of analysis, but the social circulation of meanings.

What about the role of pleasure in all of this? Is popular culture produced simply because it is pleasurable?

Pleasure is an extremely strong motivation: if there is no pleasure in this process of cultural production and reproduction then why on earth should anyone engage in it? The people can't engage in it for direct economic gain, they can't cash it in for immediate material gain. The main gain is pleasure and a sense of self-control, or at least control over some of the conditions of one's existence. While this does not explain everything that is going on, I think that pleasure is certainly a very

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powerful motivator for people to engage in this business of production of popular culture.

Wouldn't pleasure also be hooked up with ideology?

That's a different sort of pleasure entirely, that is pleasure as the bait on the hook of ideology, a top down pleasure that tries to organize the responses of people. Of course there is a certain degree of pleasure in aligning oneself with the forces of ideology, with the forces of power. But that to me is a pleasure of domination, which does not mean that subordinated people cannot participate in it, they can and do – in advanced capitalist societies people

often do participate in their own oppression – but this form of pleasure is a hegemonic one: it is certainly not a popular one. So we are talking about quite different orders of pleasure here.

Explain these orders of pleasure.

One of the differences is that popular pleasures are socially located and organized by the subordinate; hegemonic pleasures, top down pleasures, are ideologically organized and circulated, and I suppose I would go on to say that the top down construction of pleasure is often conceived of as a pleasure of the unconscious mind, of subjectivity, of ideology. It is a fairly abstract, distant sort of pleasure. Popular pleasures are often much more located in the body, in the physical, they are much more vulgar. The site of the body is where much popular pleasure is located, in the physicality, in the here and now, of me, right here, now.

Is that one of the dividing lines between high culture and popular culture?

It is one of them, certainly. High culture typically validates those art forms that transcend the immediate, the material, the body and its immediate contacts, so it goes for transcendent meanings. But popular culture is solidly located in the here and now, and the body becomes the inevitable materialization of the here and now. The body in popular culture is always very important.

And this would bring in current Foucauldian and Bakhtinian arguments about the body.

Yes, absolutely. Bakhtinian arguments about the indiscipline of the popular, carnivalesque body, and Foucauldian arguments about the disciplinary mechanisms which try to control and organize the body are crucially relevant here. I think that this is one of the most significant shifts in cultural theory within the last generation. The question has shifted away from how ideology works and controls, to how the body works, how the body is controlled – not just the individual body, but the body of the people, the social body, the body politic. And so there is this movement towards investigating material bodies in material places, and material behaviours, rather than a continuation of the much more abstract, non-material theories of the generation before. I don't want to put that generation down because I was part of it, my work contributed to those theories. The current shift does not invalidate its pre-

decessors, but builds on them, and enters a dialogue with them.

How do you explain the current success of cultural studies?

That's a very good question. I think one reason is that in the eighties we had a swing to the Right – Thatcherism, and Reaganism, and so on – and this has been facilitated through the success, in a limited sense, of the Right's colonization of popular pleasure and the popular voice. Reagan and Thatcher were both expert right wing populists. The Left has completely failed to articulate or connect itself with the people whose interests it claims to represent. So scholars on the Left have begun to shift their attention, and have started asking questions about how we can understand the ways in which popular culture and popular pleasure are produced. Hopefully, in the long run, the Left, instead of being abstract, distant and preachy, will learn how to understand popular pleasures and how to reconnect itself with the ways that subordinated peoples actually live under capitalism, rather than with the way the idealizing Left would like to see them live their lives. And I think that another reason for cultural studies' trendiness lies in the way that Reaganism and Thatcherism have exacerbated social difference, have widened the gap between the haves and have-nots: both have exaggerated the differences between the power-bloc and the people among multiple axes – of which gender, race and class are only the most salient. Cultural studies of the right sort is crucially concerned to analyze social difference, not pluralistically, but as part of a structured system of domination, subordination and struggle.

When we talk about the role of intellectuals and their relationship to popular culture, George Orwell comes to my mind. He, I believe, wanted to start a left wing comic book.

Yes, indeed. He was one of the first of the left wing workers in popular culture who really took aspects of that culture which the working class liked, and took them seriously. And he was able to find in them some positive values for the members of the working class.

What about Brecht?

Brecht, I'm afraid, is a wonderful example of how to get it wrong. While nobody can doubt the sincerity of his intention, his whole thesis of alienation is exactly the opposite of what popular

pleasure consists of, which is participation. Bakhtin and Bourdieu have shown us that popular culture is a participatory culture, and Brecht's attempt to alienate it means that his work is now circulated almost exclusively among the educated middle classes, and not amongst the people which he genuinely wished to reach. There was a moment, in pre-Nazi Germany, when it looked as though his project might succeed, but it passed, as I think it had to. The case of Brecht's affords us a clear example of how the Left gets it wrong when it does not understand popular culture and popular practices.

Why does the Right get it right?

Because sections of the Right have economic interests that can only be advanced by understanding popular pleasure. They have a strong motive for getting it nearly right, at any rate as right as they possibly can, so that they can incorporate these pleasures and turn them to their own economic advantage.

This brings up the whole question of consumption once again, and its relation to a popular politics of resistance.

I think that consumption is a hugely problematic area. One point to make is that the subordinate have more control over the conditions of consumption than they do over the conditions of production. They have evolved much more effective strategies for consuming in their own interests than they have for producing in their interest. Here again, the Left has concentrated much more of its attention on the conditions of production. We are only now begin-

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ning to get some sort of left wing analysis of the conditions of consumption. I see within this sphere of consumption a cultural struggle between the forces of incorporation and excorporation – a struggle *within* low culture, not a vertical one between high and low brow, but rather a horizontal one between mass culture with its economic interests and popular culture with its interests in the subordinate. The industry will constantly attempt to incorporate the practices and pleasure of the people, and the people will work to excorporate the products of the industry. It is here where much of the cultural struggle occurs, and this will, I think, be a key area of investigation for the immediate future. ♦

This interview with John Fiske was originally videotaped as part of an educational video project on cultural studies that Joe Galbo is currently working on with the Media Centre at the University of Toronto. He would like to thank Michael Edmunds, Director of the Media Centre, for his support, and John Fiske for generously taking the time to read the transcript and make useful additions to the text.

*Joe Galbo is a member of the editorial collective of Border/Lines.*