

# UNDERSTANDING POPULAR CULTURE

*John Fiske*



LONDON and NEW YORK

1989

## CHAPTER 5

---

### *Popular Texts*

Some texts are selected by the people to be made into popular culture, others are rejected. In this chapter and the next, I wish to outline some of the characteristics of texts that are made popular, and to explore some of the key criteria that shape the selection process.

#### **THE PRODUCERLY TEXT**

A popular text should be producerly. To understand this term we need to refer to those characteristics discussed by Barthes (1975a) in his distinction between readerly and writerly tendencies in texts, and the reading practices they invite. Briefly, a readerly text invites an essentially passive, receptive, disciplined reader who tends to accept its meanings as already made. It is a relatively closed text, easy to read and undemanding of its reader. Opposed to this is a writerly text, which challenges the reader constantly to rewrite it, to make sense out of it. It foregrounds its own textual constructedness and invites the reader to participate in the construction of meaning. In his elaboration of these textual tendencies, Barthes is concerned primarily with literature, and concludes that the readerly text is the more accessible and popular, the writerly the more difficult, avant-garde, and therefore of minority appeal.

The category of the producerly is needed to describe the popular writerly text, a text whose writerly reading is not necessarily difficult, that does not challenge the reader to make

sense out of it, does not faze the reader with its sense of shocking difference both from other texts and from the everyday. It does not impose laws of its own construction that readers have to decipher in order to read it on terms of its, rather than their, choosing. The producerly text has the accessibility of a readerly one, and can theoretically be read in that easy way by those of its readers who are comfortably accommodated within the dominant ideology (if any such readers actually exist, do oil magnates watch *Dallas*?), but it also has the openness of the writerly. The difference is that it does not require this writerly activity, nor does it set the rules to control it. Rather, it offers itself up to popular production; it exposes, however reluctantly, the vulnerabilities, limitations, and weaknesses of its preferred meanings; it contains, while attempting to repress them, voices that contradict the ones it prefers; it has loose ends that escape its control, its meanings exceed its own power to discipline them, its gaps are wide enough for whole new texts to be produced in them—it is, in a very real sense, beyond its own control.

The commodities produced and distributed by the culture industries that are made into popular culture are those that get out of control, that become undisciplined. But they do not, like the writerly text, "make strange," their indiscipline is the indiscipline of everyday life, it is familiar because it is an inescapable element of popular experience in a hierarchal, power-structured society. They do not, then, require this writerliness, for to require it is to discipline it (the writerly reader of an avant-garde text is a disciplined one), but they allow it, they are unable to prevent it. The social experience that determines the relevances that connect the textual to the social and that drive this popular productivity is beyond textual control, in a way that is different from the more specifically textual competence and experience of the writerly reader of the avant-garde text.

To return to de Certeau's metaphor (see Chapter 2), the colonizing army that wishes to maintain control of difficult, mountainous territory must expose itself to guerrilla raids—it can protect itself only by withdrawing to its citadels. Popular culture is always difficult mountainous territory for those who wish to control it (whether for economic, ideological, or

disciplinary reasons), and its guerrilla readings are a structural necessity of the system. The economic needs of the industries can be met only if the people choose their commodities as adequate resources for popular culture; hegemonic force can be exercised only if the people choose to read the texts that embody it, and they will choose only those texts that offer opportunities to resist, evade, or scandalize it; strategic top-down power can operationalize itself only at the points of resistance where it meets tactical, bottom-up power. Popular culture is shot through with contradictions, and the "contra" element of its "diction" derives from the producerly readers of its (reluctantly) producerly texts.

Analyzing popular texts, then, requires a double focus. On the one hand we need to focus upon the deep structure of the text in the ways that ideological, psychoanalytic analyses and structural or semiotic analyses have proved so effective and incisive in recent scholarship. These approaches reveal just how insistently and insidiously the ideological forces of domination are at work in all the products of patriarchal consumer capitalism. When allied with the work of the political economists, and the critical theorists of the Frankfurt School they expose, with terrifying clarity, the way in which the economic and ideological requirements of the system determine, and are promoted by, almost every aspect of everyday life. But to confine ourselves to this focus alone is not only to cut ourselves off from an equally important area of culture in capitalist societies, but also to confine ourselves to a position that is ultimately debilitating in its pessimism. It may justify our righteous distaste for the system, but it offers little hope of progress within it, and only a utopian notion of radical revolution as a means of changing it.

The complementary focus is upon how people cope with the system, how they read its texts, how they make popular culture out of its resources. It requires us to analyze texts in order to expose their contradictions, their meanings that escape control, their producerly invitations; to ask what it is within them that has attracted popular approval. Traditional academic analysis and professional criticism have rarely focused upon popular texts in this way; critics, whether academic or professional, tend to act as disciplinary prefects, for their traditional role is

threatened by popular productivity and by popular discrimination. One starting point for the popular analyst, then, is to investigate what traditional critics ignore or denigrate in popular texts, and to concentrate on those texts that have either escaped critical attention altogether or have been noticed only to be denigrated. The combination of widespread consumption with widespread critical disapproval is a fairly certain sign that a cultural commodity or practice is popular. Let me look at some of these reasons popular culture is dismissed, derided, or attacked and see if there might be some positive side to these "vulgaritys."

## LANGUAGE

Popular culture is often attacked for its (mis)use of language. The question at issue here is whether the mass media and popular culture debase our language or revitalize it, and, allied to this, we must ask why it is that the popular use (or "misuse") of language causes such offense and concern to so many (who happen, not surprisingly, to be members of the educated bourgeoisie with a vested interest in preserving their control over education and the "proper" use of language that it teaches). One scandalous, undisciplined use of language will serve as my focus here—that of the pun.

Let me start with a specific example. A *New York Post* (5 February 1988) story begins: "An emotional Senate GOP leader Robert Dole yesterday wrote a \$500 personal check to the Nicaraguan Contras in the wake of the House's 'grievous mistake' in voting down a \$36 million aid package." The headline is DOLE BUYS INTO NEW CONTRAVER\$Y.

The tabloid press does not reproduce vernacular speech—to do so would be impossible, for such speech patterns vary immensely across class, race, age, gender, and regional differences—but it has developed a form of language that enables various oral cultures to find resonances between it and their own speech patterns, and to find pleasure in relating the two. It achieves this largely through its departures from official,

correct language. There is a tone of disrespect running throughout it that ensures that Dole's personal check to the Contras is hardly likely to be read as an admired heroic act. Part of this disrespect is carried by the pun "buys into," where the vernacular metaphoric usages (which are surprisingly hard to pin down) come into collision with a specific literal use (all \$500 of it). The difference between the multiple vernacular usages and this singular literal one is the difference between vernacular, oral, popular cultures and the literate, official, disciplined one.

The pleasure in the pun is twofold. There is the pleasure in playing with the different uses of language as a microcosmic moment in the constant play of class and social differences: the pun offers a variety of street vernacular meanings of the check that differ from Dole's as widely as do the social positions of Dole and the *Post's* readers, and the pun allows the "vulgar" meanings to be seen as "more true" and so more powerful than the official one. The pun's pleasure lies not just in its linguistic miniaturization of social relations, but in its inversion of the power that normally structures them. The second type of pleasure is that of productivity: puns invite producerly readings, there is a pleasure in spotting and solving the pun that matures into the greater pleasure of making one's own pertinent meaning from the collision of discourses within it. Puns cannot control the relationships among their contradictory discourses, they simply bundle them up together and let the reader do the rest. (There may also be a less marked, but discoverable, pleasure in the irony of a Republican senator whose name is a word more commonly associated with poverty and social welfare. The discovery and decoding of irony offers similar pleasures to that of the pun.)

The "word" CONTRAVER\$Y works differently. The lexical association of the Contras with controversy may, at one level, serve to trivialize, and thus show disrespect for, the political battles that have been fought over the issue—its trivialization may be a mark of its distance from, and irrelevance to, the everyday life of the reader. The pun of \$ for S may work in the same way, a sign that the big dollars are over there, away from us (along with Dole's check), spoken in a tone of streetwise skepticism. But again, the punning does more than allow a

linguistic reexperience of social difference (or distance, alienation); it also misuses "their" language. It is a refusal to submit to linguistic discipline, a momentary tactic by which the linguistic system is raided and used "trickily," disrespectfully.

De Certeau's (1984) distinction between reading and decipherment is relevant here. Decipherment is learning how to read someone else's language on the other's terms; reading is the process of bringing one's own oral, vernacular culture to bear upon the written text. Decipherment requires training and education organized by the same social forces that control the linguistic system; it is part and parcel of the same strategic deployment of power. Its function is to subjugate the reader to the authority of the authored text, and thus of the critic-teacher as a strategic agent who gains from the power in which he or she participates. Reading, however, requires an oral culture that precedes the written (the scriptural), that has developed beyond or against the "official" language and is thus opposed to its discipline. Decipherment promotes the text as an example of *langue*, an embodiment of the universal system of language that cannot be argued with but can only be used, and in its use will use its user; decipherment trains its readers to be used by the system. Reading, however, emphasizes *parole* over *langue*, practice over structure. It is concerned with the everyday uses of language, not its system or correctness. Reading emphasizes contextuality, the unique relations of this particular linguistic use to this particular contextual moment. It is thus concerned with the transient and impermanent, for relevance must be impermanent, as social allegiances change and are forged differently for different moments and purposes. The pleasure of CONTRAVER\$Y is that it has not been used before and will not be used again (this may or may not be "factually" true, but the point is that the "word" presents itself as unique, created for this momentary context and specific to it). The uniqueness, the contextuality, resides in the domain of the popular, it is part of the culture of everyday life, and as such is opposed to the generality, the normalization, and thus the discipline, of the linguistic system in which is inscribed "correctness" and whose rules are important not just because they control the way it should be used, but because acceptance of them is yet another way in which people govern themselves.

Puns are vulgar, part of oral culture: literacy prefers the serious, disciplined use of language that puns disrupt (what school teaches its students to pun? The idea is almost unthinkable.) Written language is linear, its connections are logical, bound by the laws of cause and effect. Puns are associative, they escape these laws, for associative relations are far freer than logical ones. Puns dissolve the linear flow of thought by which the reader is led by the hand from one idea to the next; rather, they involve parallel processing, the ability to process disparate but simultaneous flows of information.

Of course, punning is equally characteristic of some writerly, literary texts: James Joyce's work, for example, is full of puns. In avant-garde texts punning performs a similarly offensive function as in producerly texts, but it does so for a different readership and with a different relationship to the everyday. The readers of the avant-garde belong to a literary minority, an artistic leadership whose role is to free art from the conventions of its tradition and to open it up to new modes of representation in the future. Such writerly works have to teach their readers the codes and reading practices by which to make sense of them; they are in advance of their readers, their originality and their difficulty are two sides of the same coin.

Producerly punning, however, reproduces textually the contradictions that its readers already experience socially. It therefore has no "educational" function, it is not in advance of its readers; it is a textual device that allows them to articulate their social experience in it, so it does not attempt to make that experience unfamiliar, only to allow its contradictions a moment of recognition.

We must be clear, however, that the difference between writerly and producerly punning lies in their reading practices rather than in any essential differences between the puns themselves. CONTRAVER\$Y is actually quite a Joycean word.

Greenfield (1984) suggests that some of the reasons many adults (particularly well-educated ones) are inept at, and therefore critical of, video games is because the ability to play them involves parallel processing, the ability to absorb multiple patterns of information simultaneously and to perceive rather than analyze the structured relationships between those patterns. The mental processes are quite different to those

linear ones so well trained into the literate elite. The advertisement for a hair conditioner that shows the head and naked shoulders of a young woman, with the caption "Use your head, give your hair body" is packed with parallel lines of thought. To "use your head" is simultaneously to think clearly and to make its attractiveness the bait for the male. Giving the hair body is what the product does, as it is what the reader does as her (his?) imagination is asked to create the (naked) body below the shoulders, and in so doing to produce the implied body of the male looking at her. Three bodies are given here, and give each other—those of the hair, of the female, and of the implied male. Reading the advertisement is not a literate skill, for it requires the parallel (not sequential) processing of words and image, of puns within words, of puns between words and image. The truck-stop sign

EAT HERE

GET GAS

allows no punctuation marks, prepositions, or conjunctions (all the organizers of relationships and therefore closers of meaning in literate language) to control the associations between its two activities. They may be alternate, sequential, consequential, simultaneous, or even unrelated; and the vulgar, offensive, punning meaning is available only because of this associative freedom. This freedom creates the space that allows what Bakhtin (1968) calls the language of the low to disrupt the official, polite meaning. The tension between the meanings is, like all semiotic tension, social as well as semantic.

Pop song lyrics characteristically use puns (see *Reading the Popular*, Chapter 5a). Frequently these are sexual, where the official, respectable meaning is undercut by the disrespectable, sexual one. The illicit pleasure of the sexual is heightened by the presence of the controlling discourse: the oppositional relation between the two gives greater pleasure than if the sexual meaning was circulated freely, on its own. Meanings "out of control" must contain traces of the control they are escaping if they are to be popular.

In "Thriller," Michael Jackson exploits the puns in the title word to the fullest extent. As he and his girl watch a horror movie, the chorus goes

This is the Thriller, Thriller night  
Cause I could thrill you  
more than any ghost would dare to try  
Girl this is thriller  
So let me hold you tight and share a killer,  
thriller night.

The main pun brings together the flesh-creeping thrill of a horror movie with the flesh-blowing thrill of sexual orgasm—a killer in both senses. But the "boy" of the lyric is simultaneously Jackson the star and the "ordinary" boyfriend he plays in the video, so the girl is simultaneously the "ordinary" girlfriend and the star's fan. The puns work both in the boy-girl conversation and in the parallel star-fan conversation that brings to them the "thrill" of a Michael Jackson performance, the *jouissance*, the reading with the body, that is the effect upon his fans. This thrill, what Barthes would call an eroticism of the text (or, in this case, performance) is both sexual and horrific: text, orgasm, and terror reverberate within the word *thrill*. In the video, Jackson's personae shifts in parallel to the meanings of the word—he slides among Jackson as ordinary boyfriend, Jackson as star performer, and Jackson as werewolf or zombie. Under the public meanings of going to the movies or being a Michael Jackson fan lie dark orgasmic and horrific experiences that are both threatening and liberating in their escape from control.

DOLE BUYS INTO NEW CONTRAVER\$Y is a miniature replay of discipline and indiscipline, of control and creativity, of linguistic system and contextual usages. Those of us who groan or grimace at its puns but find a wry pleasure as we do so are simultaneously aligned with each side of the tension. Our pleasure derives from the creativity of the release from linguistic discipline, our displeasure from our social investment in the system that is momentarily scandalized.

Puns ("bad" puns) are common in commercial culture—advertisements, headlines, pop songs, slogans—for precisely

these reasons. They pack a multiplicity of meanings into a small space, these meanings overflow, and escape control; they require productive reading, they never come ready-made. Insofar as puns are considered a frivolous, trivial use of language they embody the tension between the correct and the playful, and the playful always has the potential to be undisciplined, scandalous, offensive. The pizza house that calls itself the Leaning Tower of Pizza and decorates its facade with a crude stucco pastiche of the original offers a set of popular pleasures that exceed and outlast those of its product.

Puns are essentially oral: one has to speak them aloud to set up not only the oppositions between the discourses they embody, but also the opposition between the oral and the literate. They offend literacy because they "oralize" it, they move language away from the discipline of literacy toward the less controlled, more context-determined usages of an oral culture. They are part of a vulgar written language that is neither oral nor literate, but a bastard form, a written language that approximates the oral and offends the literate. We might call it an oralized script.

The discipline of the literate is marked by its rules of correctness, particularly those of syntax and spelling. An oralized script has no need of correct spelling and syntax, its markers of oralization are its errors, its deviations (deliberate or ignorant) from the discipline of literacy. Oralizations such as *tonite*, *thru*, *bar-B-Q*, and *Stop 'n' Go* are so common as to have almost lost their offensiveness. They are deliberate, almost accepted. More offensive to many people are the misuses that ignore correctness such as the common ignoring of the rule that the apostrophe distinguishes among a plural, a possessive, and an elision. In oral language the context alone is enough to distinguish between *its* and *it's*, and only literate pedants care when the local grocer proclaims the freshness of his "tomato's." Oral language has no need to know if *Granny Smiths* should be equipped with an apostrophe, or, if so, whether it should precede or follow the *s*.

It is not just that oral language does not need to spell, for an oralized script does, it is that oral language is context and function oriented rather than rule oriented. If it works, that's enough. As Bourdieu (1984) points out, the working class

requires that art be functional. This oralized script is functional, it serves its purpose. And part of its purpose is not to conform, to expose the arbitrariness of linguistic rules and to show that they are not so much functional as socially distinctive and disciplinary: breaking them rarely destroys meaning but says much about social class. Oralized language has moved toward the functional—*tonite* and *thru* are shorter, and even in that minimal sense, are more functional than their correct versions.

This sort of bastardization is quite different from "Pentagonese," which is excessively literate; it detaches words from their immediate context or speaker, spells them correctly, and uses them grammatically. This is language that depends so exclusively upon its systematic rules that it decontextualizes itself entirely: it refuses any concrete specificity, whether of speaker, of context, or of reference.

Deviation from the norm is not in itself a mark of a popular language, though it is often evidence of an attempt to achieve it. The shop window proclaiming "Chocolate Kreations Easter Speshals" deviates to draw attention to itself and thus to serve the purposes of the merchant; its popular potential appears to be much more limited, though it may, for some reader-consumers, signal a pleasurable difference between holiday and everyday shopping. This possible reading apart, it would appear to be neither particularly pleasurable nor functional. In this it differs from an apparently similar deviation, "Kra-Zee Golf" in garishly irregular letters. Here it is the context, the specificity of its uses, that increases its popular potential. The release that it offers from linguistic rules is paralleled by a release from the rules of conventional golf that is in turn a parallel of the release from social normality that a holiday offers ("Kra-Zee Golf" is, of course, a holiday entertainment). Its context presents greater opportunities for offensive pleasures than does that of the "Easter Speshals," whose difference from any other special offer does not provide as carnivalesque a moment for the language to work within.

Oral language is context based, and the context is not just physical, but also temporal and social. The holiday meanings of "Kra-Zee Golf" work only if one is physically in a resort, in a holiday period, and thus in an appropriate set of social allegiances. In such a context the oralized script is more likely

to be taken into the popular (while retaining its base in the commercial). Oralized script is both the commercial attempt to approximate the popular and the popular appropriation of that attempt.

### EXCESS AND THE OBVIOUS

Popular culture tends to the excessive, its brush strokes are broad, its colors bright. This excessiveness invites its denigrators to attack it as "vulgar," "melodramatic," "obvious," "superficial," "sensational," and so on. Highbrow criticism is frequently accurate in its analysis, but wrong in its evaluation, so we may well accept its characterization of popular texts as excessive and obvious, while rejecting or even reversing its negative evaluation of these characteristics.

Excessiveness and obviousness are central features of the producerly text. They provide fertile raw resources out of which popular culture can be made. Excessiveness is meaning out of control, meaning that exceeds the norms of ideological control or the requirements of any specific text. Excess is overflowing semiosis, the excessive sign performs the work of the dominant ideology, but then exceeds and overflows it, leaving excess meaning that escapes ideological control and is free to be used to resist or evade it. The excessive victimization of the heroine of a romance novel, her exaggerated suffering at the hands of the hero, exceeds the "normal" victimization and suffering of women in a patriarchy. Norms that are exceeded lose their invisibility, lose their status as natural common sense, and are brought out into the open agenda. Excess involves elements of the parodic, and parody allows us to mock the conventional, to evade its ideological thrust, to turn its norms back on themselves.

The cover of *Weekly World News* (15 March 1988) is excessive, sensational and obvious (see Figure 7). There is nothing muted or subtle about it, but there is a pattern, there is an appeal, there is a point to its pleasures. It, and its many look-alikes that enliven supermarket checkout lines, speaks to the

**PARENTS CATCH CHILD ABUSER — ON VIDEOTAPE!**

**NEWS**

Too late for love? NEVER!  
 Woman, 77, elopes with  
 90-year-old boyfriend

**ALIEN MUMMY FOUND!**

He looks like an E.T. who  
 never made it home

**Top model marries leper**

**QUIZ REVEALS HOW SEXY YOU REALLY ARE**

Laser beam sets  
 brain surgery  
 patient ablaze

Was this  
 man fired  
 — for being  
 too fat?

**Hitchhiking ghost causes car wrecks**

Figure 7

disaffected. The great American dream is a bitter illusion for the millions who are not enjoying its promised prosperity, who do not control their own lives and do not experience the satisfaction of being successful, powerful individuals. Every headline on the page is a sensational example of the inability of "the normal" (and therefore of the ideology that produced it) to explain or cope with specific instances of everyday life. The world it offers the reader is a world of the bizarre, the abnormal. It investigates the boundaries of common sense in order to expose its limits. And common sense is, of course, the dominant ideology at work.

This page, then, is not an escapist fantasy bringing some unusual stimulation into the drabness of the everyday. Such a dismissive "explanation" of sensationalism leads one finally to the belief that those who find pleasure in it are essentially indiscriminating and have such blunted sensibilities that only the crassest, most exaggerated sensationalism can get through to them at all—a view that may do much for the egos of those that hold it, but that does little to explain the popularity of such magazines in contemporary America. Such sensational exposures of the inadequacy of the norms are pleasurable in themselves, especially for those whose material social experience is "abnormal," that is, those who, if they adopted the dominant bourgeois values, would have to make sense of their own lives as "failures." So the story about a top model marrying a leper or a 77-year-old woman eloping with a 90-year-old "boyfriend" are pleasurable because they enable those whose sexual relationships "fail" to accord with the romantic ideology of the "normal" couple to question the norms rather than their own experience. So, too, the pleasures in the failures or inadequacies of science (the laser beam that set the brain surgery patient ablaze, or scientists' inability to explain the alien mummy) are the pleasures of seeing the dominant, controlling explanations of the world at the point of breakdown, pleasures that are particularly pertinent to those who feel barred from participating in controlling discourses of any sort, scientific or not. The sensational is the excessive failure of the normal, and as such pushes the norms to the limits of their adequacy and then exceeds them, pushes them over the edge.

A "normal," good-looking young working man holding an

excessively abnormal mummified alien from outer space is an illustration of a special everyday experience that differs from ordinary experience only in degree, not in kind, for it is a moment when the inadequacy of the ideological norms can be experienced in an abnormally extreme form. The abnormality is one of degree only; the normality is the failure of the dominant social values to match the everyday experiences of the disadvantaged millions.

Such sensationalism does not, of course, articulate the actual experience of the disaffected and disadvantaged, for the ways in which different social groups are prevented from achieving these ideological norms are multifarious and depend upon the many social positions that can be described as "disadvantaged." What all groups have in common is the experience of subordination and exclusion, so the demonstrated failures of that from which they are excluded open the text up for the various readers to make various pertinences between it and their own lives. Portraying "the other" negatively allows for an open range of positive pleasures to be negotiated.

The popularity of such sensational publications is evidence of the extent of dissatisfaction in a society, particularly among those who feel powerless to change their situation, and the fact that there are more of them, and that they are more visible, in the United States than in, for example, Australia or the United Kingdom may say something about the exclusiveness of American ideology and the harshness with which it treats those it excludes. The more socialist inflections of capitalism in Australia and the United Kingdom (despite Thatcherism) may offer some explanation of why there are fewer such publications in those countries.

Sensational, obvious, excessive, clichéd—the qualities of popular texts are almost indistinguishable from one another. In the next section I argue that the obvious refuses the "in-depth" truth, which is finally a controlling discourse—the obvious offers no insightful explanation, and leaves itself open. But obviousness is not just a characteristic of what is dealt with, it lies also in the way it is handled—the obvious and the clichéd are two sides of the same coin.

In the days of movable type, a cliché was a word or phrase that printers would leave whole, or "clenched" together (the



meaning of the French word *cliché*), because they knew that such words or phrases would be used frequently. It is not enough to dismiss clichés as evidence of lazy thinking or lack of linguistic creativity; rather, we should ask why it is that certain words or phrases are used so frequently by certain people at certain times—what is it about them that makes them popular?

Cliches are the commonsense, everyday articulations of the dominant ideology. So the metaphor found in such phrases as "Time is money," "spending (or wasting) time," or "investing time in" is so much a cliché that we forget it is a metaphor, because it makes time conform perfectly to the Protestant work ethic—it makes a capitalist sense of time by turning it into something that can be possessed, saved, invested, something that some people can have more of than others, that can reward the efficient and penalize the lazy. The metaphor is fully hegemonic, it is common sense in performance as an ideological practice.

Similarly, Ron Perlman, who plays Vincent, the beast in the TV series *Beauty and the Beast*, talks in clichés when he says:

I think women want to be romanced. They want to be treated specially. They want to have poetry read to them, instead of sitting there watching this guy in an undershirt watching football games. (*Star*, 8 March 1988: 25)

The clichés of women as sensitive and romantic, and domestic, and of men as slobby, selfish jocks, are, at one level, the common sense of patriarchal capitalism. Behind them lies the "common sense" that the man is like this at home only because his goal-oriented attitudes and behavior are work-specific and he has earned the right to relax at home, and that the romantic nature of women means that they can find true happiness only in the love of a man, not in career or other satisfactions. (The fact that most men fail to live up to women's needs is not allowed to invalidate these needs and thus to question the ideology that has produced them.) Romance can be explained as the training of women for marriage (see *Reading the Popular*, Chapter 5b). There is, of course, a heavy and relatively explicit irony here, that the price women have to pay to maintain their

actual marriages is the extinction of those romantic feelings that the ideology of patriarchal marriage produced as essential elements of femininity in the first place. Cliches bear ideological norms, which is why they are such powerful constructors and circulators of common sense. But this does not explain all their cultural uses: they can also work to expose the gap between that ideology and everyday experience. The contradictions between the poetic woman and the sports-mad man can work not only to make a cliché of the price women have to pay, but to make that price visible and accountable.

Thus, a fan writes to Perlman:

Please keep Beauty and the Beast on the air. I need to be able to pretend Vincent is real. I wish he were, but then if he was, I'd probably leave my husband and children and run away and live with him. And what would my mother think? (*Star*, 8 March, 1988: 25)

A complex, but typical, set of negotiations is at work here. First there is a recognition of the gap between the unattainable norm and everyday reality that is reproduced in the recognition of the difference between the televisual representation and the real. This recognition gives the viewer the right (and ability) to deny that difference, and to treat the representation as though it were the real in order to increase textual pleasure. This ability to move into and out of the text, simultaneously to affirm and deny its textuality, is pleasurable because it is a movement under the control of the viewer. She is not the dupe of the text, but is in charge of her own reading relations. Reading the popular text is no simple escapism in which the everyday is temporarily left behind. The fan knows that even if Vincent were "real" she would not run away with him—her jocular reference to her mother is a wry acknowledgment of the internalized discipline by which people govern themselves, and of the fact that this discipline is restrictive and destructive of pleasure. The clichés are experienced as clichés—that is, as an ideological common sense produced by others—but they have been internalized so that they are simultaneously *ours* and the *other's*. The gap between the internalized *other* of the cliché and the unique *ours* of our everyday life is a skeptical, demystifying one (the writer is aware of the commonality of

dissatisfaction with husband and children—she feels no need to justify or expand on it, but can rely on other women to recognize the feeling in general, though her experience of it, the form it takes with her husband and her children is, or at least feels, uniquely hers).

Cliches deny the uniqueness of the text, which is why they are so abhorred by the critical values that establish priorities for textual uniqueness and the creativity of the author: they allow for meaningful pertinences to be made between the specificities of everyday life and the ideological norms they embody. Cliched writing is writing by norm, writing as naked ideological practice. The cliché is read as its norms intersect with the practices and experiences of everyday life. Far from being a hegemonic agent with an effectiveness close to that of brainwashing, the cliché often exposes the “otherness” of the dominant ideology and often makes strange the extent of the compromises that have to be made to accommodate it with everyday life.

### **CONTRADICTIONS AND COMPLEXITY**

Popular culture is contradictory: It is shot through with contradictions that escape control. Those who accuse it of being simplistic, of reducing everything to its most obvious points, of denying all the subtle complexity, all the dense texture of human sentiment and of social existence, are applying inappropriate criteria and blinding themselves to where the complexities of popular culture are actually to be found. Of course, popular culture does not resemble a highly crafted sonnet or lyric poem, nor does it attempt to reproduce the psychological depth and density of texture of a novel by Henry James (for which we should all be truly grateful). The complexities for which poetry and literature are valued are located typically in its use of language and its ability to use the full resources of a language to provide an artistic correlative of the subtle varieties and fine differences of individual sentiment. The valued links are those between people at the level of our

essential humanity: It thus denies the social, and in particular avoids the political.

I am not arguing an essentialist view of literature here, but am pointing to the way it is taught and circulated in our society—its differences from popular culture lie more in the ways it is used in society than in its texts. Those critics who argue that Shakespeare used to be popular culture but is no longer draw entirely the wrong conclusion from their observation: the implication should not be that the popular tastes of the twentieth century are more degraded than those of the seventeenth, but rather that the institutionalization of literature (in which these same critics are so active) has made Shakespeare into high art, given him correct meanings, confined him to expensive or arty theaters and above all made him into an examinable subject, so that those who decipher him better receive higher grades and thus are eventually established as better, brighter individuals than those whose decipherment is less “insightful.” How can a text be popular when it is used to discriminate among individuals and to train people into the habits of thought and feeling of another class? Bourdieu’s (1984) main argument is, as the title of his book *Distinction* indicates, that culture is used to distinguish among classes and fractions of classes, and to disguise the social nature of these distinctions by locating them in the universals of aesthetics or taste. The difficulty or complexity of “high” art is used first to establish its aesthetic superiority to “low,” or obvious, art, and then to naturalize the superior taste and (quality) of those (the educated bourgeoisie) whose tastes it meets. A critical industry has been developed around it to highlight, if not actually create, its complexity and thus to draw masked but satisfying distinctions between those who can appreciate it and those who cannot. Artistic complexity is a class distinction: difficulty is a cultural turnstyle—it admits only those with the right tickets and excludes the masses.

Conversely, a popular art is characterized as simple and arouses what Bourdieu (1984: 486–488) calls the “disgust of the facile.” The facile text, which gives itself to all comers, is talked of in terms of its “easiness”—terms also applied to a woman of “easy” virtue who is an “easy lay.” These discursive links between the disresponsible, easy text and disresponsible

sexuality are extended to cover other physical pleasures, particularly those of eating disrespectful foods. So popular texts are not only "easy," they are "sickly," "sugary," "cloying." The vocabulary is that of childish taste, an immature, easy, undeveloped taste that is *of itself* inferior to the mature taste of the adult bourgeoisie. The discursively constructed similarities among childishness, femininity, and the subordinate classes is a typical piece of patriarchal bourgeois ideology working in the realm of culture.

Reading texts is a complex business; and the complexity of popular texts lies as much in their uses as in their internal structures. The densely woven texture of relationships upon which meaning depends is social rather than textual and is constructed not by the author in the text, but by the reader: it occurs at the moment of reading when the social relationships of the reader meet the discursive structure of the text. *Dallas* is a complex text because so many and such diverse audiences can make so many and diverse intersections between it and their social relations. Its dialogue, its representation of relationships among people, its psychological depth, its exploration of the infinitely subtle problems and rewards in accommodating the needs of the individual with the demands of the social—all of these may be only alluded to, sketched in superficially in the broadest brush strokes. But that is precisely its strength. It is a text full of gaps, it provokes its producerly viewers to write in their meanings, to construct their culture from it.

The reader of a novel is often told in great detail of the interior feelings and motivations of a character: The viewer of television has to infer all of these from a raised eyebrow, a downturn at the corner of the mouth, or the inflection of the voice as it speaks the cliché. By "showing" rather than "telling," by sketching rather than drawing completely, popular texts open themselves up to a variety of social relevances. Telling or revealing the truth hidden below the surface is the act of a closed, disciplinary text and requires decipherment rather than reading. Showing the obvious leaves the interior unspoken, unwritten; it makes gaps and spaces in the text for the producerly reader to fill from his or her social experience and thus to construct links between the text and that experience. The refusal of depth and of fine distinctions in the text devolves

the responsibility for producing them to the reader. And we know that some readers, at least, do just that. The way that some women, for instance, talk about soap opera shows how intimately they fill in, or rather flesh out, the emotional lives of the characters in a way that makes them as completely rounded as any produced by a psychological dramatist. The productivity is in the reading rather than in the writing.

### **TEXTUAL POVERTY AND INTERTEXTUALITY**

Behind the criticism of the poverty of popular texts lies the unsuspected assumption that a text should be a highly crafted, completed, and self-sufficient object, worthy of respect and preservation; universities, museums, and art galleries are all curators of such texts. But in popular culture, texts as objects are merely commodities, and as such they are often minimally crafted (to keep production costs down), incomplete, and insufficient unless and until they are incorporated into the everyday lives of the people. They are resources to be used disrespectfully, not objects to be admired and venerated.

Much contemporary cultural theory argues that all texts are incomplete and can be studied only intertextually and in their modes of reception, but the social and academic practices of textual analysis, preservation, and display still grant to the "aesthetic" text a degree of completion, self-sufficiency, and respect that is inappropriate to popular texts. Popular texts are to be used, consumed, and discarded, for they function only as agents in the social circulation of meaning and pleasure; as objects they are impoverished.

A pair of jeans in a museum of fashion is not totally meaningless—depending on their relationships to other garments in the display they could carry a number of generalized meanings about twentieth-century America—but they are still an impoverished text. Their meanings can be brought to fruition only intertextually, by including the ways they are promoted commercially, the ways they are worn and talked/thought about by their users, and the meanings that the press

and other social commentators make of them. In other words, the study of popular culture is the study of the circulation of meanings—treating a text as a privileged object artificially freezes that circulation at a particular (if convenient) point and overemphasizes the role of the text within it. The popular text is an agent and a resource, not an object.

So Madonna (see *Reading the Popular*, Chapters 5a and 5b) is circulated among some feminists as a reinscription of patriarchal values, among some men as an object of voyeuristic pleasure, and among many girl fans as an agent of empowerment and liberation. Madonna as a text, or even as a series of texts, is incomplete until she is put into social circulation. Her gender politics lie not in her textuality, but in her functionality. She is an exemplary popular text because she is so full of contradictions—she contains the patriarchal meanings of feminine sexuality and the resisting ones that her sexuality is *hers* to use as she wishes in ways that do not require masculine approval. Her textuality offers both patriarchy and ways of resisting it in an anxious, unstable tension. She is excessive and obvious; she exceeds all the norms of the sexualized female body and exposes their obviousness along with her midriff. Her sexualization of her navel is a parody of patriarchy's eroticization of female body fragments—she is a patriarchal text shot through with skepticism.

Far from being an adequate text in herself, she is a provoker of meanings whose cultural effects can be studied only in her multiple and often contradictory circulations. Popular culture circulates intertextually, among what I have called primary texts (the original cultural commodities—Madonna herself or a pair of jeans), secondary texts that refer to them directly (advertisements, press stories, criticism), and tertiary texts that are in constant process in everyday life (conversation, the ways of wearing jeans or dwelling in apartments, window shopping, or adopting Madonna's movements in a high school dance) (see Fiske 1987a, 1987b). All the texts of Madonna—primary, secondary, or tertiary—are inadequate and incomplete. Madonna is only the intertextual circulation of her meanings and pleasures; she is neither a text nor a person, but a set of meanings in process. Even though she can be studied only in her texts and the relations between them, for those are the

moments when meanings in process become most visible, the texts themselves are not signifying objects, but agents, instances and resources of popular culture.

When the movie *The Shining* was first released in Britain, the press circulated different meanings of it around different social classes. Newspapers aimed at an upscale readership promoted it as a Stanley Kubrick film; they identified its key moments as ones that bore his signature (long, eerie tracking shots down hallways, for instance) and they organized its intertextual relations around its author-creator. The tabloid press, on the other hand, spoke of it as a genre film; they related it not to other Kubrick films, but to other horror movies, selected its scariest moments as its crucial ones, and evaluated it using generic, not authorial, comparisons. *Spare Rib*, for its feminist readership, read it as another agent in the victimization of women and thus related it intertextually to patriarchal cinema (and culture) in general, the widest and most explicitly political sense of intertextuality of all.

Intertextuality may not be unique to popular culture—it was central to the “high” cultural readings of *The Shining* as well, but it works differently. The high cultural intertextual relations organized around the author-artist are more limiting than ones organized around genre or gender politics, and they accord well with the status of the text as a crafted object. Indeed, the veneration of the author-artist is a necessary correlative of the veneration of the text. In popular culture the object of veneration is less the text or artist and more the performer, and the performer, like Madonna, exists only intertextually. No one concert, album, video, poster, or album cover is an adequate text of Madonna. Intertextual competence is central to the popular productivity of creating meanings from texts.

The poverty of the individual text in popular culture is linked not only to its intertextual reading practices, but also to its ephemerality and repetitiousness. For it is not just the needs of the industry that require the constant reproduction of the cultural commodity, but also the forces of popular culture. The poverty of the individual text and the emphasis on the constant circulation of meanings mean that popular culture is marked by repetition and seriality, which, among other effects, enable it to fit easily with the routines of everyday life. Magazines are

published weekly or monthly, records played constantly, television organized into series and serials, clothes worn and discarded, video games played time and again, a sports team watched game after game—popular culture is built on repetition, for no one text is sufficient, no text is a completed object. The culture consists only of meanings and pleasures in constant process.

Because of their incompleteness, all popular texts have leaky boundaries; they flow into each other, they flow into everyday life. Distinctions among texts are as invalid as the distinctions between text and life. Popular culture can be studied only intertextually, for it exists only in this intertextual circulation. The interrelationships between primary and secondary texts cross all boundaries between them; equally, those between tertiary and other texts cross the boundaries between text and life. As Bourdieu (1984) argues, one of the main distinctive features of popular culture against high culture is its resolute refusal of any distance between the aesthetic and the everyday (see Chapter 6). It is only the completed, venerated text beloved of the bourgeoisie that benefits from this aesthetic distance.

The texts of popular culture, then, are full of gaps, contradictions, and inadequacies. It is what aesthetic criticism would call its “failures” that enables the popular text to invite producerly readings; they allow it to “speak” differently in different contexts, in different moments of reading, but this freedom is always struggling against textual (and social) forces that attempt to limit it. The popular text is a text of struggle between forces of closure and openness, between the readerly and the producerly, between the homogeneity of the preferred meaning and the heterogeneity of its readings. It reproduces and recreates the struggle between the disciplinary power of the social order and the multiple resistances to this power, the multiple bottom-up powers that contest differently the more singular top-down power.

Popular texts must offer popular meanings and pleasures—popular meanings are constructed out of the relevances between the text and everyday life, popular pleasures derive from the production of these meanings by the people, from the power to produce them. There is little pleasure in accepting ready-made meanings, however pertinent. The pleasure

derives both from the power and process of making meanings out of their resources and from the sense that these meanings are *ours* as opposed to *theirs*. Popular pleasures must be those of the oppressed, they must contain elements of the oppositional, the evasive, the scandalous, the offensive, the vulgar, the resistant. The pleasures offered by ideological conformity are muted and are hegemonic; they are not popular pleasures and work in opposition to them.