Also by John Fiske:

READING THE POPULAR

MYTHS OF OZ
Reading Australian Popular Culture
(with Bob Hodge and Graeme Turner)

TELEVISION CULTURE

READING TELEVISION
(with John Hartley)

INTRODUCTION TO COMMUNICATION STUDIES
To Lisa
To Lucy and Matthew
CHAPTER 2

Commodities and Culture

FORMATIONS OF THE PEOPLE

Popular culture in industrial societies is contradictory to its core. On the one hand it is industrialized—its commodities produced and distributed by a profit-motivated industry that follows only its own economic interests. But on the other hand, it is of the people, and the people's interests are not those of the industry—as is evidenced by the number of films, records, and other products (of which the Edsel is only the most famous) that the people make into expensive failures. To be made into popular culture, a commodity must also bear the interests of the people. Popular culture is not consumption, it is culture—the active process of generating and circulating meanings and pleasures within a social system: culture, however industrialized, can never be adequately described in terms of the buying and selling of commodities.

Culture is a living, active process: it can be developed only from within, it cannot be imposed from without or above. The fears of the mass culture theorists have not been borne out in practice because mass culture is such a contradiction in terms that it cannot exist. A homogeneous, externally produced culture cannot be sold ready-made to the masses: culture simply does not work like that. Nor do the people behave or live like the masses, an aggregation of alienated, one-dimensional persons whose only consciousness is false, whose only relationship to the system that enslaves them is one of
unwitting (if not willing) dupes. Popular culture is made by the people, not produced by the culture industry. All the culture industries can do is produce a repertoire of texts or cultural resources for the various formations of the people to use or reject in the ongoing process of producing their popular culture.

"The people" is not a stable sociological category; it cannot be identified and subjected to empirical study, for it does not exist in objective reality. The people, the popular, the popular forces, are a shifting set of allegiances that cross all social categories; various individuals belong to different popular formations at different times, often moving between them quite fluidly. By "the people," then, I mean this shifting set of social allegiances, which are described better in terms of people's felt collectivity than in terms of external sociological factors such as class, gender, age, race, region, or what have you. Such allegiances may coincide with class and other social categories, but they don't necessarily: they can often cut across these categories, or often ignore them. So that while there clearly are interrelationships between the structure of the social system and cultural allegiances, they are not rigidly determinate ones at all.

The necessity of negotiating the problems of everyday life within a complex, highly elaborated social structure has produced nomadic subjectivities who can move around this grid, realigning their social allegiances into different formations of the people according to the necessities of the moment. All these reformulations are made within a structure of power relations, all social allegiances have not only a sense of with whom, but also of against whom: indeed, I would argue that the sense of oppositionality, the sense of difference, is more determinative than that of similarity, of class identity, for it is shared antagonisms that produce the fluidity that is characteristic of the people in elaborated societies.

The various formations of the people move as active agents, not subjugated subjects, across social categories, and are capable of adopting apparently contradictory positions either alternately or simultaneously without too much sense of strain. These popular allegiances are elusive, difficult to generalize and difficult to study, because they are made from within, they are made by the people in specific contexts at specific times. They are context- and time-based, not structurally produced: they are a matter of practice, not of structure.

Young urban Aborigines in Australia watching old Westerns on Saturday-morning television ally themselves with the Indians, cheer them on as they attack the wagon train or homestead, killing the white men and carrying off the white women: they also identify with Arnold, the eternal black child in a white paternalist family in Different Strokes—constructing allegiances among American blackness, American Indianness, and Australian Aboriginality that enable them to make their sense out of their experience of being nonwhite in a white society (Hodge & Tripp, 1986). They evade the white, colonialisit ideology of the Western to make their popular culture out of it, they evade the "white father will look after you" message of Different Strokes in order to find their meanings and their pleasures in Arnold's everyday practices of coping with it. But the dominant ideology has to be there: the pleasure produced by Arnold exists only because he is subject to (but not subjugated by) a white ideology whose paternalism is seen by them as antagonistic, not benevolent. So, too, the pleasure in the Indians' successes in the middle of the Western narrative is, in part, dependent on their inevitable defeat at the end. Popular culture has to be, above all else, relevant to the immediate social situation of the people. Aboriginal meanings and pleasures can be made only within and against white domination: without the textual reproduction of the power that is being struggled against, there can be no relevance.

A text that is to be made into popular culture must, then, contain both the forces of domination and the opportunities to speak against them, the opportunities to oppose or evade them from subordinated, but not totally disempowered, positions. Popular culture is made by the people at the interface between the products of the culture industries and everyday life. Popular culture is made by the people, not imposed upon them; it stems from within, from below, not from above. Popular culture is the art of making do with what the system provides (de Certeau 1984). The fact that the system provides only commodities, whether cultural or material, does not mean that the process of consuming those commodities can be adequately
described as one that commodifies the people into a homogenized mass at the mercy of the barons of the industry. People can, and do, tear their jeans.

THE COMMODITIES OF CULTURE

Let us take television as the paradigm example of a culture industry, and trace the production and distribution of its commodities (or texts) within two parallel, semiautonomous economies, which we may call the financial (which circulates wealth in two subsystems) and the cultural (which circulates meanings and pleasures). They can be modeled thus:

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<th>Financial Economy</th>
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<td>Producer:</td>
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The Two Economies of Television

The production studios produce a commodity, a program, and sell it to the distributors, the broadcasting or cable networks, for a profit. This is a simple financial exchange common to all commodities. But this is not the end of the matter, for a television program, or cultural commodity, is not the same sort of commodity as a material one such as a microwave oven or a pair of jeans. The economic function of a television program is not complete once it has been sold, for in its moment of consumption it changes to become a producer, and what it produces is an audience, which is then sold to advertisers.

For many, the most important product of the culture industries is the commodified audience to be sold to advertisers. Smythe (1977) argues that capitalism has extended its power from the world of work into that of leisure, and so, by watching television and thus participating in the commodification of people, we are working as hard for commodity capitalism as any worker on the assembly lines. This argument is both accurate and incisive as far as it goes, but it remains fixed within the economic base of society, and can explain meanings or ideologies only as mechanistically determined by that base. It can account for the popularity of jeans only in terms of their durability, cheapness, and easy availability, but not in terms of their variety of cultural meanings.

In a consumer society, all commodities have cultural as well as functional values. To model this we need to extend the idea of an economy to include a cultural economy where the circulation is not one of money, but of meanings and pleasures. Here the audience, from being a commodity, now becomes a producer, a producer of meanings and pleasures. The original commodity (be it a television program or pair of jeans) is, in the cultural economy, a text, a discursive structure of potential meanings and pleasures that constitutes a major resource of popular culture. In this economy there are no consumers, only circulators of meanings, for meanings are the only elements in the process that can be neither commodified nor consumed: meanings can be produced, reproduced, and circulated only in that constant process that we call culture.

We live in an industrial society, so of course our popular culture is an industrialized culture, as are all our resources; by "resources" I mean both semiotic or cultural ones and material ones—the commodities of both the financial and cultural economies. With very few and very marginal exceptions, people cannot and do not produce their own commodities, material or cultural, as they may have done in tribal or folk societies. In capitalist societies there is no so-called authentic folk culture against which to measure the "inauthenticity" of mass culture, so bemoaning the loss of the authentic is a fruitless exercise in romantic nostalgia.

However, the fact that the people cannot produce and circulate their own commodities does not mean that popular culture does not exist. As de Certeau (1984) puts it, people have to make do with what they have, and what they have are the products of the cultural (and other) industries. The creativity of
popular culture lies not in the production of commodities so much as in the productive use of industrial commodities. The art of the people is the art of “making do.” The culture of everyday life lies in the creative, discriminating use of the resources that capitalism provides.

In order to be popular, then, cultural commodities have to meet quite contradictory needs. On the one hand there are the centralizing, homogenizing needs of the financial economy. The more consumers any one product can reach, and the more any one product can be reproduced by the existing processes within the cultural factory, the greater the economic return on it. It must therefore attempt to appeal to what people have in common, to deny social differences. What people in capitalist societies have in common is the dominant ideology and the experience of subordination or disempowerment. The economic needs of the cultural industries are thus perfectly in line with the disciplinary and ideological requirements of the existing social order, and all cultural commodities must therefore, to a greater or lesser extent, bear the forces that we can call centralizing, disciplinary, hegemonic, massifying, commodifying (the adjectives proliferate almost endlessly).

Opposing these forces, however, are the cultural needs of the people, this shifting matrix of social allegiances that transgress categories of the individual, or class or gender or race or any category that is stable within the social order. These popular forces transform the cultural commodity into a cultural resource, pluralize the meanings and pleasures it offers, evade or resist its disciplinary efforts, fracture its homogeneity and coherence, raid or poach upon its terrain. All popular culture is a process of struggle, of struggle over the meanings of social experience, of one’s personhood and its relations to the social order and of the texts and commodities of that order. Reading relations reproduce and reenact social relations, so power, resistance, and evasion are necessarily structured into them.

As Stuart Hall (1981: 238) says,

The people versus the power-bloc: this, rather than “class-against-class,” is the central line of contradiction around which the terrain of culture is polarized. Popular culture, especially, is organized around the contradiction: the popular forces verses the power-bloc. This leads him to conclude that the study of popular culture should always start with “the double movement of containment and resistance, which is always inevitably inside it” (p. 228).

Tearing or bleaching one’s jeans is a tactic of resistance; the industry’s incorporation of this into its production system is a strategy of containment. Maintaining the relative autonomy of the cultural economy from the financial opens up cultural commodities to resistant or evasive uses: attempts to close the gap, to decrease the autonomy are further strategies of containment or incorporation. Advertising tries to control the cultural meanings of commodities by mapping them as tightly as possible onto the workings of the financial economy. Advertising works hard to match social differences with cultural differences with product differences.

White patriarchal capitalism has failed to homogenize the thinking and the culture of its subjects, despite nearly two centuries of economic domination (and much longer in the domains of gender and race). Our societies are intransigently diverse, and this diversity is maintained by popular and cultural forces in the face of a variety of strategies of homogenization. Of course capitalism requires diversity, but it requires a controlled diversity, a diversity that is determined and limited by the needs of its mode of production. It requires different forms of social control and different social institutions to reproduce itself and its subjects, so it produces class differences and fractional or sectional differences within those classes. The owners of capital can maintain their social position only because the social order in which they flourish has produced legal, political, educational and cultural systems that, in their own spheres, reproduce the social subjectivities required by the economic system.

But social diversity exceeds that required by capitalism, by patriarchy, by racial dominance. Of course patriarchy requires and thrives on gender differences, but it does not require feminism, it does not require women to opt out of marriage or to decide to raise children with no father figure. Racial dominance does not require black separatism, or that black high school students should opt out of the whitest educational system, to the extent that success in that system can be seen as a betrayal of blackness.
Society is structured around a complex matrix of axes of difference (class, gender, race, age, and so on), each of which has a dimension of power. There is no social difference without power difference, so one way of defining the popular is, as Hall does, to identify it by its oppositionality to “the power-bloc.”

The popular can also be characterized by its fluidity. One person may, at different times, form cultural allegiances with different, not to say contradictory, social groups as he or she moves through the social formation. I may forge for myself quite different cultural allegiances to cope with and make sense of different areas of my everyday life. When, for instance, the age axis appears crucial, my allegiances may contradict those formed when, at other times, those of gender or class or race seem most pertinent.

People watching Archie Bunker, the bigoted male in All in the Family, made sense of him quite differently according to how they positioned themselves within the social formation and thus the cultural allegiances they forged. “His” meanings could and did move fluidly along the axes of class, age, gender, and race, to name only the most obvious, as viewers used him as a cultural resource to think through their social experience and the meanings they made out of it. The polysemic openness of popular texts is required by social differences and is used to maintain, question, and think through those differences.

Similarly, product differences are required by social differences, but do not produce them, though they can be used to maintain them. Advertising tries to maintain as close a match as possible between social difference and product difference, and to give the latter some control over the former. The ubiquity of advertising and the amount of resources it requires are evidence of how far social differences exceed the diversity required by the economic system. There is so much advertising only because it can never finally succeed in its tasks—those of containing social diversity within the needs of capitalism and of reducing the relative autonomy of the cultural economy from the financial, that is, of controlling not only what commodities people buy but the cultural uses they put to them. The advertising industry is undoubtedly successful at persuading manufacturers and distributors to buy its services: its success in persuading consumers to buy particular products is much more open to question—between 80 per cent and 90 per cent of new products fail despite extensive advertising. To take another example, many films fail to recover even their promotional costs at the box office.

Information such as the fact that a 30-second television commercial can cost as much to produce as the 50-minute program into which it is inserted can lead to a moral panic about the subliminal manipulation of commercials being in direct proportion to their production values. Yet Collett’s report for the IBA in London showed how typical it is for the TV viewer’s attention to leave the screen as soon as the commercials appear. And the children who occasionally watch commercials so carefully are not necessarily being turned into helpless consumers. The Sydney children who in 1982 turned a beer commercial into a scatological playground rhyme were neither atypical nor commodified as they sang, “How do you feel when you’re having a fuck, under a truck, and the truck rolls off? I feel like a Tooheys, I feel like a Tooheys, I feel like a Tooheys or two” (Fiske 1987a). Similarly, the kids who sang jeeringly at a female student of mine as she walked past them in a short skirt and high heels, “Razzmatazz, Razzmatazz, enjoy that jazz” (Razzmatazz is a brand of panty hose, and its jingle accompanied shots of long-legged models wearing the brightly colored products) were using the ad for their own cheeky resistive subcultural purposes: they were far from the helpless victims of any subliminal consumerism, but were able to turn even an advertising text into their popular culture.

Two recent reports add fuel to my optimistic skepticism. One tells us that the average Australian family has 1,100 advertisements aimed at it every day. Of these, 539 are in newspapers and magazines, 374 on TV, 99 on radio, and 22 at the movies. The remainder are flashed on illuminated signs or displayed on billboards, taxis, buses, shop windows, and supermarket checkouts. But, the research concluded, people remember only three or four ads each day (Daily News, 15 October 1987). Another survey tested recall of eight popular slogans from TV ads. A total of 300 women between ages 20 and 30 were tested to see if they could add the name of the product to the slogan. The highest score achieved was 14 per cent; the average was 6 per cent (West Australian, 2 November 1987). Neither of these
surveys evidences a terrifyingly powerful and manipulative industry that is a cause for moral panic.

Of course, all ads sell consumerism in general as well as a product in particular; their strategy of commodification is not in dispute, only its effectiveness. We all have a lifetime’s experience of living in a consumer society and of negotiating our way through the forces of commodification, of which ads are one, but only one, and they are no more immune to subversion, evasion, or resistance than any other strategic force.

If a particular commodity is to be made part of popular culture, it must offer opportunities for resisting or evasive uses or readings, and these opportunities must be accepted. The production of these is beyond the control of the producers of the financial commodity: it lies instead in the popular creativity of the users of that commodity in the cultural economy.

**EVERYDAY LIFE**

The everyday life of the people is where the contradictory interests of capitalist societies are continually negotiated and contested. De Certeau (1984) is one of the most sophisticated theorists of the culture and practices of everyday life, and running through his work is a series of metaphors of conflict—particularly ones of strategy and tactics, of guerrilla warfare, of poaching, of guileful ruses and tricks. Underlying all of them is the assumption that the powerful are cumbersome, unimaginative, and overorganized, whereas the weak are creative, nimble, and flexible. So the weak use guerrilla tactics against the strategies of the powerful, make poaching raids upon their texts or structures, and play constant tricks upon the system.

The powerful construct “places” where they can exercise their power—cities, shopping malls, schools, workplaces and houses, to name only some of the material ones. The weak make their own “spaces” within those places; they make the places temporarily theirs as they move through them, occupying them for as long as they need or have to. A place is where strategy operates; the guerrillas who move into it turn it into their space; space is practiced place.

The strategy of the powerful attempts to control the places and the commodities that constitute the parameters of everyday life. The landlord provides the building within which we dwell, the department store our means of furnishing it, and the culture industry the texts we “consume” as we relax within it. But in dwelling in the landlord’s place, we make it into our space; the practices of dwelling are ours, not his. Similarly, the readings we make of a text as we momentarily “dwell” within it are ours and ours alone. Lefebvre (1971: 88) is thinking along the same lines as de Certeau when he uses the distinction between compulsion and adaptation to point out the opposition between the strategy of the powerful (compulsion) and the tactics of the weak (adaptation): “He who adapts to circumstances has overcome compulsion . . . adaptation absorbs compulsion, transforms and turns them into products.”

Against what he calls “the misery of everyday life,” with “its tedious tasks and humiliations,” Lefebvre sets “the power of everyday life,” the manifestations of which include:

its continuity . . . the adaptation of the body, time, space, desire: environment and the home . . . creation from recurrent gestures of a world of sensory experience; the coincidence of need with satisfaction, and, more rarely, with pleasure: work and works of art; the ability to create the terms of everyday life from its solids and its spaces. (p. 35)

De Certeau (1984: 18), with his greater emphasis on popular resistances, argues that the culture of everyday life is to be found in “adaptation” or “ways of using imposed systems,” which he likens to “trickery—(russe, deception, in the way one uses or cheats with the terms of social contracts).”

Innumerable ways of playing and foiling the other’s game . . . characterise the subtle, and stubborn resistant activity of groups which, since they lack their own space, have to get along in a network of already established forces and representations. People have to make do with what they have. In these combatants’ stratagems, there is a certain art in placing one’s blows, a pleasure in getting around the rules of a constraining space . . . Even in the field of manipulation and enjoyment (p. 18).
The key words characterizing the tacts of everyday life are words like adaptation, manipulation, trickery. As de Certeau asserts so confidently, "People have to make do with what they have," and everyday life is the art of making do.

Cohen and Taylor (1976) trace the origin of their more pessimistic account of the resistances and evasions of everyday life to their work with long-term prisoners. As good Marxists, they initially sought to explain criminal behavior as forms of radical resistance to bourgeois capitalism. However, the prisoners themselves were "more concerned" with "ways of making out in the world than radical techniques for confronting it" (p. 12). Cohen and Taylor came to wonder if the important question was not how to change the world, but rather "in what ways should one resist or yield to its demands in order to make life bearable, in order to preserve some sense of identity" (p. 13). Their account traces resistances, and particularly evasions—hence the title of their book, Escape Attempts: it does not ascribe to the subordinate the power to raid the system, to turn the resources it provides into the means of attacking or evading it. De Certeau's distinctive contribution (contra Lefebvre's and Cohen and Taylor's) is his insistence on the power of the subordinate and on the system's points of vulnerability to this power.

In the consumer society of late capitalism, everyone is a consumer. Consumption is the only way of obtaining the resources for life, whether these resources be material-functional (food, clothing, transport) or semiotic-cultural (the media, education, language). And, of course, the difference between the two is only analytical convenience—all material-functional resources are imbricated with the semiotic-cultural. A car is not just transport, but a speech act; cooking a meal is not just providing food, but a way of communicating. All the commodities of late capitalism are "goods to speak with," to twist a phrase of Lévi-Strauss's. Their speech potential is not affected by economics, so there is no value in distinguishing between what is paid for directly (clothes, food, furniture, books), those whose costs are indirect (television, radio), and those that appear to be "free" (language, gesture). Linguistic resources are no more equitably distributed in our society than are economic resources. The meanings we speak with our bodies are as much directed and distributed by the agencies of social power as those of television or of the catalog from which we furnish our homes.

What is distributed is not completed, finished goods, but the resources of everyday life, the raw material from which popular culture constitutes itself. Every act of consumption is an act of cultural production, for consumption is always the production of meaning. At the point of sale the commodity exhausts its role in the distribution economy, but begins its work in the cultural. Detached from the strategies of capitalism, its work for the bosses completed, it becomes a resource for the culture of everyday life.

The productivity of consumption is detached from wealth or class. Often the poor are the most productive consumers—unemployed youths produce themselves as street art in defiant displays of commodities (garments, makeup, hairstyles) whose creativity is not determined by the cost. Neither the expense of the commodity nor the number of commodities that can be afforded determines the productivity of their consumption.

Consumption is a tactical raid upon the system. As de Certeau (1984: 31) puts it:

In reality, a rationalized, expansionist, centralized, spectacular and clamorous production is confronted by an entirely different kind of production, called "consumption" and characterized by its ruses, its fragmentation (the results of the circumstances), its poaching, its clandestine nature, its tireless but quiet activity, in short by its quasi-invisibility, since it shows itself not in its own products (where would it place them?) but in an art of using those imposed on it.

The products of this tactical consumption are difficult to study—they have no place, only the space of their moments of being, they are scattered, dispersed through our televised, urbanized, bureaucratized experience. They blend in with their environment, camouflaged so as not to draw attention to themselves, liable to disappear into their "colonizing organization" (de Certeau 1984: 31). The Viet Cong guerrilla becomes the innocent villager obeying the law of the state; the student smoking in the toilets or carving her name in the school's desk receives the graduation certificate as proof of her part.
in the system; the television viewer making scandalous, oppositional meanings is still head-counted and sold to advertisers—his oppositional acts blend cunningly into the commercial environment.

But not all of these tactical maneuvers are invisible, immaterial. Guerrillas may not be able to accumulate what they win, but what they do keep is their status as guerrillas. Their maneuvers are the ancient art of "making do," of constructing our space within and against their place, of speaking our meanings with their language. De Certeau's (1984: 30) example is a model:

Thus a North African living in Paris or Roubaix (France) insinuates into the system imposed upon him by the construction of a low-income housing development or of the French language the ways of "dwelling" (in a house or language) peculiar to his native Kabylia. He superimposes them and, by that combination, creates for himself a space in which he can find ways of using the constraining order of the place or of the language. Without leaving the place where he has no choice but to live and which lays down its law for him, he establishes within it a degree of plurality and creativity. By an art of being in between, he draws unexpected results from his situation.

The "art of being in between" is the art of popular culture. Using their products for our purposes is the art of being in between production and consumption, speaking is the art of being in between their language system and our material experience, cooking is the art of being in between their supermarket and our unique meal.

The consumer cannot be identified or gratified by the . . . commercial products he assimilates: between the person (who uses them) and these products (indexes of the "order" which is imposed on him), there is a gap of varying proportions opened by the use he makes of them. (de Certeau 1984: 32)

Lefebvre (1971: 31–32), in his earlier and less optimistic (than de Certeau's) account of everyday life, also stresses that the distinction between production and consumption is blurred in the culture of everyday life:

A culture is also a praxis or a means of distributing supplies in a society and thus directing the flow of production; it is, in the widest sense a means of production, . . . the notion of production then acquires its full significance as production by a human being of his [sic] own existence. . . . This implies first that culture is not useless, a mere exuberance, but a specific activity inherent in a mode of existence, and second that class interests (structurally connected to production and property relations) cannot ensure the totality of society's operative existence unaided.

Despite his emphasis on the power of "the bureaucratic society of controlled consumption" (p. 68) to order our social and interior lives, a process he calls "cybernetization," he concludes that, finally,

the consumer, especially the female of the species, does not submit to cybernetic processes. . . . As a result, not the consumer, but consumer-information is treated to conditioning—which may perhaps restrict cybernetic rationality and the programming of everyday life. (p. 67)

The object of analysis, then, and the basis of a theory of everyday life is not the products, the system that distributes them, or the consumer information, but the concrete specific uses they are put to, the individual acts of consumption-production, the creativities produced from commodities. It is a study of enunciation, not of the language system. Enunciation is the appropriation of the language system by the speaker in a concrete realization of that part of its potential that suits him or her. It is the insertion of the language system into a unique moment of social relations, it exists only in the present and creates a speaking space that exists only as long as the speech act. Descriptions of the linguistic system and how it "speaks," its subjects, cannot account for the concrete specifics of its uses; the study of enunciations investigates the specificities of each context of use, for it is these that materialize the gap between the system and the user.

The young are shopping mall guerrillas par excellence. Mike Pressdee (1986) coins the productive term "proletarian shopping" to describe the activities of the young unemployed he studied in an Australian mall (see Reading Popular Culture,
Chapter 2). With no money but much time to spend, they consumed the place and the images, but not the commodities. They turned the place of the mall into their space to enact their oppositional culture, to maintain and assert their social difference and their subordinated but hostile social identities. They would cluster around store windows, preventing legitimate consumers from seeing the displays or entering; their pleasure was in disrupting the strategy and in provoking the owner-enemy to emerge and confront them, or to call in the security services to move them on. These security services were visible strategic agents whose power invited raids and provocations. Drinking alcohol was forbidden in the mall, so the youths would fill soda cans with it and, while consuming the rest places provided for legitimate shippers, would also drink their alcohol under the surveillance of the guards. The guards, of course, knew what was going on, and would make sudden excursions into guerrilla territory only to find that an apparently inebriated youth was actually drinking soda—the power had been subjected to a guileful ruse. De Certeau points to the importance of the “trickster” and the “guileful ruse” throughout history in peasant culture; the ruse is the art of the weak, like taking a trick in a card game, a momentary victory, a small triumph deriving from making do with the resources available that involves an understanding of the rules, of the strategy of the powerful. This constant “trickery” is, for de Certeau, at the heart of popular culture:

The actual order of things is precisely what “popular” tactics turn to their own ends, without any illusion that it will change any time soon. Though elsewhere it is exploited by a dominant power or simply denied by an ideological discourse, here order is tricked by an art. Into the institution to be served are thus insinuated styles of social exchange, technical inventions and moral resistance, that is, an economy of the “gift” (generosities for which one expects a return), an aesthetics of “tricks” (artists’ operations) and an ethics of tenacity (countless ways of refusing to accord the established order the status of a law, a meaning or a fatality). (p. 26)

Shoplifting is another area of constant trickery and tenacity. The accessible, tempting display of goods is clearly a strategy of power, but to exert the power the army has to emerge from its fortress into guerrilla terrain. Commodities are “lifted” for numerous reasons, from the pathological to the material-economic, but among them are the tactical—the pleasure of spotting and exploiting the strategic moment of weakness, and, sometimes, of tricking the order further by returning the stolen goods and claiming a refund because they were unsuitable. Katz’s (1988) study of the attractiveness of crime may be more individualistic and moralistic than de Certeau would wish, but it does reveal the pleasures of such (illegal) tactics. Katz writes of amateur shoplifters’ “delights in deviance” and, when describing middle-class adolescents, shows how their shoplifting is fueled not by economic need but by a desire for the “sneaky thrills” that the boredom and discipline of everyday life denies them. Shoplifting is not a guerrilla raid just upon the store owners themselves, but upon the power-bloc in general; the store owners are merely metonyms for their allies in power—parents, teachers, security guards, the legal system, and all the agents of social discipline or repression.

Moving the price tag from a lower- to a higher-priced item before taking it to the cashier is as illegal as shoplifting, and stores enforce the law as rigorously as possible, but we must wonder just how different in kind such practices are from the legal “trickery” of two secretaries spending their lunch hour browsing through stores with no intention to buy. They try on clothes, consume their stolen images in the store mirrors and in each other’s eyes, turn the place of the boutique into their lunchtime space, and make tactical raids upon its strategically placed racks of clothes, shoes, and accessories. The boutique owners know these tactics but are helpless before them: one estimated that one in thirty browsers becomes a consumer. And no one can tell which is which. The U.S. Army could not tell the Viet Cong from the innocent villager, for at a different time, in a different space, one became the other in a constant and unpredictable movement into and out of the order. Browsers become consumers when and if they choose; many never do, but steal the image or style, which they then reproduce at home out of last year’s clothes, last month’s styles. One must wonder how different this “browsing,” this “proletarian shopping,” is from the white-collar worker’s equipping his school-age children with pens and rulers from his office or xeroxing the
minutes of his community council meeting on the copier at work. How different is shoplifting from the university professor asking the university television technician to clean the heads on her video recorder? In legal terms, distinctions are made, however uncertainly; in terms of popular culture, all are guileful tactics, the everyday arts of the weak. Eco (1986: 174) tells the story of the Yale student telephoning his girlfriend in Rome for "free" by dialing the credit number of a multinational: "It's not the immediate saving that counts, the student explained, it's the fact that you're screwing the multinationals who support Pinochet and are all fascists." Eco goes on to show that, paradoxically, the larger and more complex the system becomes, the easier they are to trick, and the more damage such tricks can cause. The trickster with unauthorized access to a computer system is in a position of enormous power. But such tricks differ only in technological sophistication from de Certeau's (1984: 25) definitive example of "la perruque," the wig:

La Perruque is the worker's own work disguised as work for his employer. If differs from pilfering in that nothing of material value is stolen. It differs from absenteeism in that the worker is officially on the job. La Perruque may be as simple a matter as a secretary's writing a love letter on "company time" or as complex as a cabinetmaker's "borrowing" a lathe to make a piece of furniture for his living room. In the very place where the machine he must serve reigns supreme, he cunningly takes pleasure in finding a way to create gratuitous products whose sole purpose is to signify his own capabilities through his work and to confirm his solidarity with other workers or his family through spending his time in this way. With complicity of other workers (who thus defeat the competition the factory tries to instill among them), he succeeds in "putting one over" on the established order on its home ground. Far from being a regression toward a mode of production organized around artisans or individuals, la perruque re-introduces "popular" techniques of other times and other places into the industrial space (that is, into the present order).

The place of shopping malls is turned into numberless spaces temporarily controlled by the weak. Teenagers use them as their personal spaces in which to meet, to make trysts, to display and consume fashions; the stores are an inexhaustible resource bank of images, available to be turned into personal style, personal enunciations. Mothers and children, and older people, consume the malls' heating or air conditioning in extremes of weather. In winter, shopping malls become indoor exercise areas for many; some malls have notices welcoming "mall walkers," others have exercise areas conveniently placed along the "walks," so that walkers can enhance their use of the resources, can get more out of the system, even if the system knows it. How many and which of these "tricking" walkers become consumers nobody knows. The colonizing power cannot tell if it has ceded terrain to the guerrillas or has contained their activity. But to call this containment is to talk strategically and to discount the innumerable tactical raids that are not contained.

The place of malls is designed strategically for commerce: the magnet of a big supermarket and/or department store, selling necessities, around it/them myriad specialty stores selling luxuries, spontaneous purchases, or more everyday specialties—pharmaceutical goods, T-shirts. Among them are leisure services, hairdressers, travel agents, movie theaters and coffee shops and eateries, from bistros to fast-food chains. Between and around them are open spaces, rest areas, telephones, banking machines, fountains, plants. And, at strategically determined times, they offer entertainments and displays, fashion shows, dance displays by local schoolchildren, carol singing, magic shows, versions of TV game shows and celebrity appearances.

The place and the timing of scheduled uses are clearly the strategy of commerce, but there is a huge paradox here—power can achieve its ends only by offering up its underbelly to the attacker; only by displaying its vulnerabilities to the guerrillas can the occupying army hold its terrain, however tenuously. So the place that is the strategy of commerce represses its organizing strategy: it has been forced to know that the popular uses will not conform to its strategic plan, so it becomes formless, open. People use it as they will. To attract consumers is to attract tricksters; encouraging consumption encourages trickery, robbery, la perruque.

De Certeau (1984: 40) argues that the very success of the bureaucratic commercial order within which we live has created, paradoxically, the means of its own subversion, its
very existence now depends upon those fissures and weaknesses that make it so vulnerable to the incursions of the popular:

In any event, on the scale of contemporary history, it also seems that the generalization and expansion of technocratic rationality have created, between the links of the system, a fragmentation and explosive growth of these practices which were formerly regulated by stable local units. Tactics are more and more frequently going off their tracks. Cut loose from the traditional communities that circumscribed their functioning, they have begun to wander everywhere in a space which is becoming at once more homogeneous and more extensive. Consumers are transformed into immigrants. The system in which they move about is too vast to be able to fix them in one place, but too constraining for them ever to be able to escape from it and go into exile elsewhere. There is no longer an elsewhere. Because of this, the “strategic” model is also transformed, as if defeated by its own success.

Jameson (1984), reflecting on Portman’s *Bonaventure* Hotel in Los Angeles, notices how the space here is so disordered as to be anarchic—it has failed totally to impose any order on itself or the consumer in its shopping malls. In this organizational failure, the ability of the human body “to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively map its position in a mappable external world” is transcended, and, I would argue, stands for the inability of the order of things to order the place of the individual. Jameson goes on to argue that

this alarming disjunction point between the body and its built environment . . . can itself stand as the symbol and analogue of that even sharper dilemma which is the incapacity of our minds . . . to map the great global multinational and decentred communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects. (pp. 83–84)

Jameson’s argument that the “new decentred global network of the third stage of capital” is a “network of power and control” that is particularly “difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp” (p. 80) suggests that its power to determine our subjectivities is so diffuse as to be questionable. In fact, the power may be so distant that it imposes no order, but produces only the fragmented postmodern subject. As Eco points out, the larger the system, the easier it is to trick, and the less effectively it can control those who move within it.

The structures of early capitalism were visible, its agencies of power easily apprehensible. When the factory owner lived in the house on the hill and workers in terraced cottages in the shadow and smoke of the factory or pithead, everyone knew the system that ordered where he or she worked or dwelt. The system was as visible as its inequalities; its power was naked. The shift to corporate capitalism was a shift toward invisibility; the system became more abstract, more distanced from the concrete experiences of everyday life and thus less apprehensible. In late capitalism’s further shift to the multinational that transcends nations or states, the system has become so distant, so removed, so inapprehensible that its power to control and order the details of everyday life has paradoxically diminished. So the postmodern place of the *Bonaventure* is a disorder, a disorganization of the fragmented, transitory, discontinuous spaces of each of its users. The order of the system that builds and manages the shopping malls is consistently at risk of being turned into the disorder of those who use them, in a way that the small corner deli never was.

**DEFINING THE POPULAR**

There can be no popular dominant culture, for popular culture is formed always in reaction to, and never as part of, the forces of domination. This does not mean that members of dominant social groups cannot participate in popular culture—they can and do. But to do so they must reform their allegiances away from those that give them their social power. The businessman entertaining his colleagues in a private box at a football game is not participating in popular culture; the same man, however, devoid of his business suit and sporting the favors of his local team as he cheers them on from the bleachers, can be. To participate in the popular, however, he must be able to call up other social allegiances, possibly those formed as a
youth in the neighborhood. His tastes and his cultures are social, not individual; as a social agent he can exert some control over the allegiances he forms, but not over the social order that frames them.

Similarly, popular readings of mass cultural texts are not the only ones. *Dallas* may be read *popularly* as a criticism of capitalism or of patriarchy (and we know that sometimes it is), but this does not mean that all of its readers find popular meanings and pleasures in viewing it all of the time. It is perfectly feasible theoretically and probable practically that some viewers decode it dominantly and find pleasure in aligning themselves with the capitalist, consumerist, sexist, racist values that are as clearly there in the program as they are in the society that produces and circulates it. The fact that ethnographic studies of *Dallas* viewers have not discovered such perfectly positioned subjects may be the result of the ideological framings of the investigations themselves, for they have concentrated (though not exclusively) on nonmainstream audiences. Ang’s (1985) viewers were, of course, self-selected fans, and thus their readings may be typical of the dedicated audiences, but they were Dutch, and not American, and so they read *Dallas* under social conditions that were quite different from those of its production. But if there are readings that fail to activate its contradictions—that is, readings that consent to its hegemonic strategy—these are not part of popular culture: they are complicit with the interests of the power-block against which the formations of the people are variously situated (Hall 1981).

In understanding the interplay of forces in this constant struggle between the power-block and the people, it is important to avoid essentializing meanings and taking them out of their culturally and historically specific moments of production. Ang’s Dutch fan of *Dallas* may have found great pleasure in its representation of wealth and life in the fast lane; but the “meaning” of this pleasure will be quite different in Holland from that of apparently similar pleasure experienced by an American yuppie. Its Americanliness may well, in Holland, bear resisting meanings that it cannot in the United States. The Americanliness of American popular cultural commodities is often, in other nations, used to express opposition to the forces of domination within those societies. A reading, like a text, cannot of itself be essentially resistant or conformist: it is its use by a socially situated reader that determines its politics.

The role of the critic-analyst, then, is not to reveal the true or hidden meanings of the text, or even to trace the readings that people make of it; rather, it is to trace the play of power in the social formation, a power game within which all texts are implicated and within which popular culture is always on the side of the subordinate.

If a reading must not be essentialized, neither must it be equated directly with a reader. A reading is the interplay of tactics and strategy, it is a poaching raid, it is part of the power game of culture; a reader is the terrain within which the game is played. Popular readings are always contradictory; they must encompass both that which is to be resisted and the immediate resistances to it. This is why popular culture is such an elusive concept: it cannot be firmly located in its texts or in its readers. One cannot go, for instance, to working-class Hispanic women and guarantee to find popular culture among them. Cultural forces and social categories do not always match so precisely. But they do intersect, and we might predict that there will be more instances of popular forces at work in Brooklyn than on Wall Street. However, we must also expect to find many instances of the subordinate being complicit with the strategies of power, and, equally, of members of the dominant classes making popular meanings and pleasures that oppose the forces of domination. The same person can, at different moments, be hegemonically complicit or resistant, as he or she reforms his or her social allegiances. Resistance fighters are law-abiding citizens much of the time; their acts of resistance are selectively sporadic, determined by a mix of the requirements of their situation and the opportunities afforded them by the strategies of the dominant. Popular culture is to be found in its practices, not in its texts or their readers, though such practices are often most active in the moments of text-reader interaction.

“The popular,” then, is determined by the forces of domination to the extent that it is always formed in reaction to them; but the dominant cannot control totally the meanings that the people may construct, the social allegiances they may form. The people are not the helpless subjects of an irresistible ideological system, but neither are they free-willed, biologically
determined individuals; they are a shifting set of social allegiances formed by social agents within a social terrain that is theirs only by virtue of their constant refusal to cede it to the imperialism of the powerful. Any space won by the weak is hard won and hard kept, but it is won and it is kept.

Popular culture is produced under conditions of subordination. Bourdieu’s (1984) massive work Distinction is one I shall turn to frequently, for it is the most detailed study we have of the interrelationships between social class and culture. His account of the working of bourgeois and proletarian cultures in contemporary France is useful insofar as we understand proletarian culture to be a form of popular culture—that produced by a people subordinated by class in a capitalist society. But class is not the only axis of domination—subordination, and within classes there are many different formations of the people. While recognizing the close interconnections between class and culture, we must not map them too deterministically one onto the other. The proletarian and the popular are overlapping but not coterminous concepts.

Equally, the correspondences between social class and cultural taste may be less precise in countries other than France, but these differences do not invalidate Bourdieu’s insights. What he gives us is an account of social and cultural forces working interactively, and by applying his findings to a sociocultural model that stresses social allegiances in constant reformation rather than objective social class, we can use his account of the cultural practices of the French bourgeoisie and proletariat to shed light upon cultural allegiances and practices that are shaped by class (and other) interests, but are not bound by stable social categories.

To give a personal example, a friend and I recently attended, on successive evenings, the opening of an exhibition at an art gallery and a concert by the Grateful Dead. The sociocultural allegiances we formed were, on each occasion, completely different, and the differences were manifest in many ways—in our topics and style of conversation and in the accents in which we spoke; in our behavior toward each other and toward other people; in our dress, gestures, and postures; in our attitude and behavior toward the art object/performance; in what we ate and drank; and so on. All of these differences had a dimension of class and power, and all of them are recognizable in the differentiated tastes that Bourdieu calls bourgeois and proletarian.

Bourdieu’s work is valuable because in his account of proletarian culture he reveals cultural practices that are typical of subordinate allegiances. So women, regardless of their class, can and do “participate” in soap opera in a way that parallels what Bourdieu has identified as a mark of proletarian culture, but that can be generalized out to refer to the culture of the subordinate, or popular culture. Similarly, Rogge (1987) in Germany has shown how women’s tastes in news are functional (another characteristic of proletarian taste identified by Bourdieu): women prefer the local news to the national because they can use its accounts of burglary and assaults in the local streets, or road accidents, and of missing children as part of their maternal function of preparing their children to face their immediate social world. Women’s tastes and proletarian tastes are similar not because women are proletarian or because the proletariat is feminine, but because both are disempowered classes and thus can easily align themselves with the practices of popular culture, for the people are formed by social allegiances among the subordinate.

Everyday life is constituted by the practices of popular culture, and is characterized by the creativity of the weak in using the resources provided by a disempowering system while refusing finally to submit to that power. The culture of everyday life is best described through metaphors of struggle or antagonism: strategies opposed by tactics, the bourgeoisie by the proletariat; hegemony met by resistance, ideology countered or evaded; top-down power opposed by bottom-up power, social discipline faced with disorder. These antagonisms, these clashes of social interests (which will be explored more fully in succeeding chapters) are motivated primarily by pleasure: the pleasure of producing one’s own meanings of social experience and the pleasure of avoiding the social discipline of the power-bloc. It is to these pleasures that we turn next.