BEYOND CELEBRATION: A CALL FOR RETHINKING CULTURAL STUDIES

Carolyn Lea

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Committee:

Dr. Ellen Berry, Advisor

Dr. Nancy C. Patterson
Graduate Faculty Representative
Dr. Donald McQuarrie
Dr. Ewart Skinner
Dr. Ellen Berry, Advisor

This is a polemical dissertation which seeks to serve as an intervention into the theoretical debates and tensions within cultural studies. These debates, which have taken place over the last few decades, have centered on the populist bent within cultural studies, the turn away from the concerns of political economy, and the influence of French theories that emphasize signification, play, and relativism. At stake in these debates is our way of understanding the world and imagining it differently. I argue that the celebratory direction found in much of the work by cultural studies scholars in which resistance, subversion and transgression are located in all things popular has led to an expressivist politics which lacks explanatory power and is symptomatic of a loss of political will. This dissertation critiques three particular directions that exemplify the celebratory turn: claims regarding transgression; claims regarding audience activity; and celebratory accounts of consumption. Chapter one provides an exposition of the debates that have plagued cultural studies, laying the ground for later arguments. Chapter two provides an introduction to reality television which is enlisted as a cultural symptom through which to interrogate weaknesses in theoretical positions (in chapters three through five) adopted by cultural studies scholars and strengths in alternative theoretical legacies. Chapter three turns toward the concept of transgression, arguing the romantic view of transgression as subversion relies on a partial reading of the work of figures such as Bakhtin. Chapter four focuses upon a critique of the limitations of conceptions of the active audience, arguing that the political economy of the Frankfurt School theorists can serve as a corrective to perspectives that divorce
production from consumption. Chapter five then examines the promotion of consumption as resistance, construing individual self-fashioning as a politics. Such an expressivist politics ignores broad structural change in favor of changing the self. Finally, I conclude that there has been a failure of imagination within cultural studies scholarship. I propose that a return to devalued theoretical legacies, such as the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School, can provide a vantage point for rethinking cultural studies.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER ONE</td>
<td>CULTURAL STUDIES ON THE LINE: ADDRESSING FISSIONS AND GAPS</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER TWO</td>
<td>SITUATING REALITY TV</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER THREE</td>
<td>TRANSGRESSION: NORM = BAD, TRANSGRESSION = GOOD OR GOTTA BE BAD TO BE GOOD</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER FOUR</td>
<td>AUDIENCE UNBOUND: “LOOK MOM – NO HANDS!”</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER FIVE</td>
<td>WHEN THE GOING GETS TOUGH THE TOUGH GO SHOPPING: CONSUMPTION AS POLITICS</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td></td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES CITED AND CONSULTED</td>
<td></td>
<td>212</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

With his re-election in 2004, President George Bush claimed that he had been given a mandate. With fifty-one percent of the popular vote, he declared the country was on course. Despite the failure to find “weapons of mass destruction” in Iraq, the war against terror was proceeding apace, tax cuts were alleviating the flagging economy and he was ready to push forward with his agenda to privatize social security and simplify the tax code. Meanwhile, almost four years later, we are still in Iraq, social programs continue to be undermined, real income continues to fall, and the United States now has the greatest divide of all industrialized countries between the rich and the poor. Millions of Americans are facing foreclosure on their homes while the stock market is reaching new highs.

With such growing disparity between the haves and the have-nots, it seems especially important that any analysis of contemporary culture take the constraints of class and the institution of globalized capitalism into account. That it would be of paramount importance to cultural studies, a field of academic study which perceives itself as political, should go unsaid. Instead, there has been a retreat from class as a point of analysis as well as from a critical analysis of the culture industries within the larger capitalist market economy. Such a retreat has signaled what has been seen as an apolitical and uncritical cultural studies and has led to broad debates both within and outside of the field in regard to theory, method, and the role of cultural studies more generally. These debates have centered on the populist bent within cultural studies, the turn away from the concerns of political economy, and the influence of postmodernism,
especially the emphasis on signification, play, relativism, and transgression. At stake in these debates is our (cultural studies) way of understanding our world and imagining it differently; that is, at stake are the questions of how cultural studies might contribute to the creation of a critical consciousness and political praxis.

This is a polemical dissertation which seeks to serve as an intervention into the theoretical debates and tensions within cultural studies. It is far from impartial; it argues that particular directions within cultural studies have foreclosed on other theoretical possibilities, limiting the questions asked as well as the answers. While it would be unfair to claim that all work within cultural studies is overly celebratory and uncritical, there has been an undeniable trend within the field toward what Jim McGuigan (1992) has called “cultural populism.” This work has a tendency to see popular cultural practices as inherently resistant and while focusing on pleasure and consumption, has tended to ignore the means of production and the broader social context within which cultural products are produced. I will argue, then, that certain trends and practices within cultural studies have, unintentionally, led to a narrowing of the grounds for critique, an anti-judgmental relativism, and an overly sentimental assessment of popular culture.

Such an anti-judgmental relativism in which all things popular become sites of “resistance,” “transgression,” “subversion,” and “opposition” fails to evaluate how resistance and transgression may not in and of themselves be progressive, and how celebrating pleasure and consumption may not be antithetical to the market but rather converge with the interests of consumer capitalism. Failing to contextualize popular cultural products within the context of production and ignoring the constraints and limitations within which audiences construct

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1 I am using the term “postmodernism” broadly here to refer to the influence of French theorists, including the poststructuralism of Foucault as well as the work of theorists such as Lyotard and Baudrillard.
meaning has led to an exaggeration of audience freedom in which we each become “authors” or “producers.” My use of the term production here refers both to the conditions of capitalist production in a Marxist sense, that is to situate cultural products within a changing global economy, but also how cultural meanings are produced within the social relations endemic to that economy. While the theoretical directions within cultural studies that I critique can be read as a reaction against what was seen as the pessimism of the Frankfurt School and/or what was seen as a reductionist Marxist economism, the failure to integrate these theoretical insights into much contemporary cultural studies work has led to a sentimental valorization of popular culture and the “people” and a notion of the political that relies on the individual and particularity and fails to imagine the possibility of collective action for structural change. The political has indeed become the personal.

This shift within cultural studies threatens to undermine the validity of cultural studies as anything more than an academic discipline, little different from literary theory or communication studies, except with a broader purview. For those of us who, like the founding fathers, conceive of cultural studies as a political intervention, a political pedagogy, this shift is of critical import. A cultural studies that uncritically celebrates the pleasures of consumption, consumer freedom, and small transgressions is a cultural studies which mimics the rhetoric of the market. What is needed, then, is a cultural studies that does not abandon the insights of critical poststructuralism and postmodernism, but also does not abandon the insights of those theoretical perspectives that are no longer fashionable within the academy. With the commodification of cultural studies as a discipline, ideas themselves have become products for consumption; theories are discarded with each new theoretical fad. I argue that a critical cultural studies must engage dialectically with the
work of the Frankfurt School, political economy and other theoretical positions it has dismissed. Such a rethinking will enable a more critical perspective and pose questions that might lead to a different way of imagining our world and quantitative change.

Arguments about the aptitude of theoretical positions in relation to cultural products should, I believe, be developed within the study of a particular cultural product or products. Aspects of current cultural practices may be drawn upon to problematize in various ways the claims put forth by cultural studies scholars. For the purposes of my argument I have chosen to explore reality television as a test case of sorts. While not entirely new, the phenomenal popularity of recent “reality” based programming has changed the landscape of broadcasting. Reality television offers the opportunity to interrogate arguments about consumption and pleasure, resistance and subversion, “readerly” texts, and the significance of understanding the appeal of such texts within the broader consumer culture. The popularity of such programs, the apparent transgressions, and the “participatory” nature of reality television (both in the sense of audience interaction and real persons as “actors”) should, given the claims of some strains of cultural studies, be a site of “emancipation,” in that it provides what some call the democratization of television. Moreover, reality television offers a site to examine the cult of individualism, in which all change takes place within the self, giving a material life to arguments about consumption and pleasure.

Drawing on multiple theoretical perspectives, including the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School\(^2\) and the work of Pierre Bourdieu, I argue that reality television enables us to

\(^2\) The term “Frankfurt School” refers to a group of Marxist scholars that were associated with the Institute for Social Research at the University of Frankfurt. The Institute was founded in 1923, but rose to prominence after Max Horkheimer became the director in 1930. The Frankfurt School theorists are seen as exemplars of Critical Theory, which stood in opposition to bourgeois traditional theory, and sought to both explain...
examine the shortcomings of such emancipatory claims in which there is a conflation of the political with the aesthetic, and individual style and posturing replace sustained communal struggle. It is not the intent of this study to suggest a singular theoretical perspective. Nor should my argument be read as a call to return to a pre-postmodern, or poststructuralist era. Rather, it should be seen as a call to broaden, rather than limit, the questions we ask in relation to culture. Theory is not static. However, new theory is not always better theory. As Antonio Gramsci wrote, “The process of creating intellectuals [and I would add theory] is long, difficult, full of contradictions, advances, retreats, dispersals and regrouping” (1971, 334). I suggest that the desire on the part of cultural studies scholars to see popular culture in a positive light as well as the desire to frame individuals as active and knowing agents has led to a romanticized view and selective theoretical borrowing from previous politically engaged scholars and complete dismissal of others. This has led to theoretical weaknesses that a re-engagement might address, changing and enriching cultural studies as now practiced.

In chapter one, I lay out my argument and position regarding particular trends within cultural studies that have led to cultural populism, a focus on transgression, resistance, and subversion in all things popular, and a failure to adequately engage with the constraints and limitations placed on cultural consumers. This chapter does not attempt a full history of cultural studies, in Britain or elsewhere, nor does it attempt to produce an impartial account of cultural studies. Rather, it is concerned with the body of literature that identifies what can be seen as problematic within contemporary cultural studies. This literature includes, but is not limited to, domination as well as advance the possibility of emancipation. The Frankfurt School developed an integrated theoretical approach which took multiple structures of domination into account, including the economic, the cultural, and the psychological (Jay 1996; Wolin 1992).
the work of Jim McGuigan and his discussion of populism and its negative effect on cultural studies; David Harris’s work on the effects of Gramscianism in cultural studies in which he argues that cultural studies readings of Gramsci are partial and distorting; and Nicholas Garnham’s work concerning the failure of cultural studies to adequately address economic issues. He argues, for example, that cultural studies fails to address the ways in which the capitalist mode of production has determining effects upon cultural practices (1995a; 1995b; 2000). These criticisms leveled against cultural studies concerning the populist shift form the basis for my later arguments and open the door for the consideration of how reality television can serve as the site of analysis for exploring the charges leveled by critics of cultural studies in chapter two.

Chapter two engages in a brief rationale for my choice of reality television to act as a foil through which to address selected topics in cultural studies. These include a romantic view of transgression, which I argue is largely due to a selective reading of particular theorists; a romantic and populist view of audiences, whose reading practices are read as subversive or democratizing; and lastly the valorization of consumption and the creativity of the consumer. This chapter also provides a brief overview of the genre and its history as well as some of the scholarly work that addresses the phenomenon.

Chapters three through five concern themselves with particular predicaments and points of contention within cultural studies. The first part of each chapter consists of an exposition of particular theoretical arguments. It is in this section that I discuss the use, critiques, and or dismissals of particular arguments, such as, arguments regarding the nature of transgression in chapter three. The second part of each chapter consists of a discussion of reality television
programming, which serves as a foil for an interrogation of the adequacy, explanatory power, and the implications of the theoretical directions pursued by cultural studies scholars.

The focus in chapter three is on the concept of transgression as a form of subversion and pleasure. In cultural studies transgression has been seen as inherently subversive and as a form of resistance and pleasure. I argue that this position is arrived at through a selective and partial reading of the work of theorists such as Michel Foucault and Mikhail Bakhtin. In opposition to this argument, I argue that transgression is neither subversive nor progressive and depends on the law it is claimed to subvert for a sense of pleasure. Drawing on the work of Georges Bataille, Foucault, and Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, as well as Bakhtin, I situate transgression within the context of play, of a blowing off of steam, that diverts attention from the material conditions of social experience. Moreover, I argue that within fast capitalism, that is, within the pace of a technologically advanced and global economic regime in which turnover happens at an accelerated pace, transgression itself becomes a market value. With the commodification of transgression, of extremes and excess, we are left to ask what is left to transgress and what the political purpose of transgression might be. Reality television provides multiple examples of the commodification of transgression, of the constant need to push limits and taboos in the search for the always new. Through a discussion of such programs as Fear Factor and Wife Swap, I will argue that transgression is not only politically neutral but has lost all force as a form of symbolic capital in which the “artist” or transgressor is set apart from or distinguished from the “masses.” In fact, I argue that transgression can now best be seen as an instrument of market capital.

In chapter four I address the issues surrounding active audiences and arguments concerning audience agency. Reality television provides a space for examining claims made
regarding the freedoms of audiences and the emancipatory potential of audience activity. It encourages interaction in the form of audience voting, web sites, identification with the “ordinary folk” that participate in the programming, and the possibility of being a contestant. Both *American Idol* and *Big Brother*, despite their differences in format, solicit audience participation in the form of voting, offering a false sense of control over the program’s outcome, and interacting through web sites devoted to the programming. In the case of *Big Brother*, fans are encouraged to access the Big Brother house on-line, where they may view (at a cost) the happenings “24/7” and participate in on-line chats. Drawing on the work of the critical theorists as well as Mark Andrejevic, I argue that such participation provides an illusion of freedom and control and that it must be contextualized within the constraints of capital, that is, it must be seen as constrained by the modes of production. Despite the apparent democratization within such television texts, in which the audience might be seen as authors and producers, such programming is, ultimately, prescribed by the needs of production and advertising. Further, we must recognize that activity in and of itself is rather meaningless. We may actively participate in our own domination. Thus, we must question whether audience activity is, in itself, progressive or diversionary; is it in any way emancipatory or does such activity enable a false sense of empowerment which encourages the neglect of and a superficial level of involvement within broader political struggles?

My concern in chapter five is with celebratory accounts of consumption. My argument here is that, contrary to the claims of much work within cultural studies, consumption practices continue to be limited by class position. Drawing on the work of the Frankfurt School and Pierre Bourdieu, I argue that class distinctions have not receded into the background to the extent
claimed and continue to exert a presence on consumption choices. Further, the pleasures of consumption, with which much of the work in cultural studies is concerned, can lead to a failure to address questions of substantive change, as the critical theorists argued, instead leading to an expressivist politics. Drawing on the work of John Sanbanmatsu, I argue that this focus has led to an expressive politics in which consumption and pleasure are equated with the expression of an authentic self, the self as aesthetic commodified object. Such a politics in which social change takes place at the level of the individual, and is conflated with style and posturing, aligns perfectly with the needs of neoliberalism and is at best compensatory and at worst a total failure of vision. The neoliberal individual is always responsible for his/her own position and the state has no need for change. Further, when identity becomes a matter of lifestyle choice, and therefore consumption, the citizen becomes the consumer. Such a citizen can be found in reality programs that “remake” the self. Lifestyle programming suggests that transformation takes place at the level of appearance. Thus, class position and background can be transcended by turning the self (or home) into a project to be refashioned. Programming such as Style Network’s Clean House and How Do I Look suggest that makeovers of house and self reveal a true and authentic “you,” expressed through lifestyle. This authentic self is always an empowered self, with happier family relationships and career success. No longer encumbered by any signifiers of the “wrong” class, these made-over consumer citizens are decored and dressed for success.

In chapter six, the conclusion, I argue against the current theoretical tide. I argue that cultural studies is not a political movement, but is a political pedagogy. Thus, I agree with Ben Agger than an uncritical, apolitical cultural studies need not exist (1992a). Further, I argue that cultural studies must cease to be compensatory, to be “image studies,” if it is to have any place
within critiques of neoliberalism. Even as we seek to complicate and transform such theoretical positions, I argue that there must be a return to “grand theory” and metanarratives that offer an alternative vision. Thus, I suggest a rereading of the Frankfurt School can serve as a corrective to current tendencies in cultural studies, though I am not suggesting that the Frankfurt School theorists alone can provide all the answers. The focus on the individual and particularity, the celebration of pleasure and consumption as resistance, is symptomatic of a loss of political will. The individualism of such strategies can easily coexist with the expansion of capitalism and the increasing disparity between haves and have-nots. Reality television is but a symptom of liberal individualism gone berserk.

The left must provide an alternative vision. It has been argued that we are currently engaged in “culture wars” with neo-conservatives. I would suggest that this is, to an extent, the left’s own doing. In its failure to provide a common vision which people can aspire to, the right can easily fill the gap with appeals to religiosity, nationalism and the sanctity of the nuclear family. In a world where we mostly see ourselves as stranded individuals, always in competition, as in the world of reality television, religion and nationalism provide a mooring that the left has failed to provide. Cultural studies cannot, in and of itself, turn the world around. But, a politically conscious cultural studies must participate in doing so.
CHAPTER ONE

CULTURAL STUDIES ON THE LINE: ADDRESSING FISSURES AND GAPS

One purports to stand four-square for the people against capitalism, and comes to echo the logic of capitalism. The consumer sovereignty touted by a capitalist society as the grandest possible means for judging merit finds its reverberation among its ostensible adversaries. Where the market flatters the individual, cultural studies flatters the group. What the group wants, buys, demands is ipso facto the voice of the people. . . . The people are already in the process of liberation!

– Todd Gitlin 1997

The title of Lawrence Grossberg’s contribution to a colloquy published in Critical Studies in Mass Communication in 1995, “Cultural Studies vs. Political Economy: Is Anybody Else Bored with This Debate,” is suggestive of the deep divisions that affect cultural studies. These divisions are evident both within cultural studies as well as in external criticisms of the field. The title is, of course, also suggestive of an apparent impasse, in which different theoretical perspectives have become entrenched, and beyond which, with some notable exceptions, there seems to be little attempt to integrate theoretical differences. My argument, that Frankfurt School theory and the perspectives of the political economy of communications are sorely needed in cultural studies to address its theoretical weaknesses, comes at a moment when both Marxism and Frankfurt Critical Theory have lost considerable ground. Neither is fashionable within the academy. However, as J. David Black suggests, at a time when the market commodifies everything and the distance between the economic and the cultural is increasingly diminished, these entrenched positions need reexamining for it may be time for the debate to get “interesting again” (2002, 149).

This chapter provides a brief history of cultural studies and its origins in Britain at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham. Its primary focus is to highlight the
body of literature that has been critical of particular directions within cultural studies. These critics charge that in its desire to locate agency through the celebration of transgressions and the radicalization of the consumption of culture and the ecstatic, active and resistant consumer, cultural studies has failed to address the material economy and its determining effects in any significant way. This has left cultural studies open to charges of cultural populism and weakened its explanatory power. Many of these charges are aimed at the influences of French theory, beginning with the influence of structuralism in the 1970s, especially the Marxist structuralism of Louis Althusser, and reaching fruition with the influence of poststructuralism of figures such as Foucault and the postmodernism of Baudrillard in the 1980s and 1990s. While we are beginning to see a step back from some of the more extreme claims from this moment in cultural studies, the excesses of this direction continue to exert an influence, as evidenced in course descriptions, conference papers, and publication titles. The institutionalization of cultural studies and commodification of theory has resulted in theory being little more than a fashion accessory, with older theories discarded like yesterday’s news and young scholars jumping on the latest theoretical fad to ensure that their work will be published by Routledge.

It should be clear that I share in the anxieties expressed in these criticisms of cultural studies. I have felt disheartened and disenchanted with a cultural studies that, for me, has abandoned its critical edge in a celebration of transgression and consumer pleasure, its fetishization of difference and fragmentation, and its failure to contribute to a broader vision of praxis. It is that concern that motivates my critique. Gramsci envisioned the creation of an alternative hegemony, the creation of a counter-hegemonic bloc. As the influence of the right has become increasingly strong in the US and elsewhere, it is essential that the left offer an
alternative vision that makes sense of the world in a way that appeals to a broad base, not just fringe elements, but also Wal-Mart shoppers.

A Brief History Cultural Studies: The CCCS

From its inception, cultural studies has conceived of itself as a political project. Thus, for Raymond Williams, “the goal of all intellectual work is or ought to be the achievement of ‘community’ or of a democratic ‘common culture’” (Patrick Brantlinger 1990, 38). The history of cultural studies is well documented (see, for example, Brantlinger 1990; Fred Inglis 1993; Andrew Milner 1994; 2002; Graeme Turner 1992). Nonetheless, a brief recounting of the theoretical influences is important for understanding the current debates within and outside of the discipline. Richard Hoggart, E.P. Thompson, and Raymond Williams, the generally accepted founding figures of cultural studies, were all trained in literary criticism. All three were influenced by Leavisite literary criticism and Romanticism. The early thrust of cultural studies can also be seen as influenced by Western Marxism, with both Williams and Thompson having been members of the Communist Party (Milner 2002). The work of Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, particularly his notion of hegemony, has had a significant impact within cultural studies influencing conceptions of agency and resistance. Gramsci’s concept of hegemony referred not only to a preferred ideology but also to everyday practices that come to constitute a common sense, a perception of reality that comes to be taken for granted. For Gramsci, hegemony was also a form of domination in which the ruling group exercises power over other groups through the legitimation of its view of the world. However, for Gramsci hegemony was not a one-way street; it involved negotiation and consensus, arguing that “hegemony
presupposes that account be taken of the interests and the tendencies of the groups over which
hegemony is to be exercised, and that a certain compromise equilibrium should be formed”
(Gramsci 1971, 110).

According to Brantlinger it is the “space between” the “total control” of a “monolithic
version of ideology” found in traditional Marxism and “the unbounded polysemy of
poststructuralism” which cultural studies “seeks to negotiate and map” (1990, 108-109). That is,
cultural studies tended to reject a version of Marxism (and Frankfurt School theory) which, put
simplistically, saw the non-ruling classes as the victims of false consciousness, subject to the
ideological control of the ruling class. While cultural studies has tended to see and understand
culture as inherently ideological, its theorists were, nonetheless, interested in theorizing agency
and resistance. Agency was always to be considered, however, within the boundaries,
constraints, and limitations of the broader social structure. A base/superstructure model of
Marxism in which culture is seen as secondary to economics was also rejected. For Williams,
such a model was not materialist enough and his theory of cultural materialism “sought to
establish the materiality of culture itself” (Milner 2002, 17). Thus, culture was not secondary to
social change, for culture was a major element in the constitution of the social order, “‘the
signifying system through which necessarily . . . a social system is communicated, reproduced,
experienced and explored’” (Williams, in Milner 2002, 18).

If this rejection of a particular version of Marxism produced an ambivalent relationship
to Marxist theory, the relationship to Leavisism is also fraught with tension. Rejecting the
Leavisite notion that only a small minority of the people could appreciate “culture,” the founding
fathers similarly rejected an elite notion of culture and a narrow definition of culture as only high
art and literature. Instead culture was seen in much broader terms as the whole of common life (Brantlinger 1990; Milner 2002). However, the founding fathers retained a notion of organicism, and while rejecting Leavisite elitism that saw only high culture as a source of enlightenment, they, like F. R. Leavis, saw mass produced culture as symptomatic of cultural decline. It was the “popular” culture of the working class, not mass produced culture, to which they turned and which they assessed in a positive light. In fact, a romantic influence can be noted in their studies of working class culture which is often seen as romanticizing or idealizing the working class. For Hoggart and Williams this may be due in part to their own working class roots (Ben Agger 1992a; Brantlinger 1990; Milner 2002).

Hoggart also pushed for the creation of and was the first director of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham, beginning his tenure in 1964. The Centre (CCCS) is generally regarded as the beginning of cultural studies as a field of study. Seeing itself as counter-disciplinary, it sought to transcend the boundaries of “established academic disciplines” and to integrate various theoretical perspectives to provide a new lens consisting of integrated, interdisciplinary approaches to culture (Brantlinger 1990, 36). If under Hoggart and the influence of the work of Williams and Thompson, the Centre’s work focused largely on class there was a significant shift under the directorship of Hoggart’s replacement, Stuart Hall who assumed the position in 1969 and remained in that position until 1979. While class remained a focus, the relationship of cultural studies to Marxism became increasingly ambivalent. Hall was far more responsive than Williams to structuralism, poststructuralism, and postmodernism. If Williams saw these theoretical approaches leading to “reversions,” formalism, and textualism (1989, 151-176), Hall moved farther and farther from Williams’ concept of cultural materialism
and refigured Gramsci’s notion of hegemony through a structuralist and poststructuralist lens (Milner 2002, 115). Additionally, a new focus on difference emerged in Hall’s work, particularly the differences of race and gender. If the founders had envisioned a common culture, such a culture was no longer thinkable as such a vision was seen as in itself a form of domination in its erasure of difference. For Milner, this is at the heart of the differences between Williams and Hall. Milner argues that for Williams “rooted settlement” is valued, for it is where “most people derive their communal identities” (Williams, in Milner 2002, 121). Opposed to this is the celebration of difference as found in Hall, in which hybrid subjects “produce themselves anew and differently” (Hall, in Milner 2002, 121). As Milner argues this move leads “Hall’s work [to] come[s] perilously close to celebrating . . . the alienated superficialities of the market” for “late capitalism, invites us to produce ourselves anew and differently, on a daily basis, whenever it insists that we consume” (2002, 122). Thus, cultural studies is seen by Milner as moving steadily away from a Marxist analysis of structural determinants and toward a new textualism, as well as toward what Maria Cevasco suggests might best be seen as “commodity studies, or image studies” (Cevasco 2000, 438).

Certainly, the shifts which took place under Hall were not without some warrant. An emerging generation of scholars pointed out the shortcomings of a theoretical approach that privileged class over other signifiers of difference. Scholars such as Charlotte Brunsdon, Angela McRobbie, and Jacqueline Rose were instrumental in the formation of the Women’s Studies Group at Birmingham which challenged what they perceived as a male-centered institution and theoretical orientation, eventually publishing *Women Take Issue* (Women’s Studies Group 1978).
Similarly, Paul Gilroy and others addressed the issue of race, producing such work as *The Empire Strikes Back* (Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies 1982), and investigating the intersection of race issues with those of class and gender. According to Kobena Mercer, “The classical Marxist view of the industrial working class as the privileged agent of revolutionary historical change has been undermined and discredited from below by the emergence of numerous social movements - [such as] feminisms, [and] black struggles” (1990, 44). Thus, this generation of scholars opened up new areas of analysis in which they sought to understand how gender and race are intricately linked to class and arguing that class alone cannot be understood outside of its imbrication with other axes of oppression. However, important as the introduction of gender and race were to the analyses of culture, today the link to class seems all but forgotten as race and gender now seem to float freely, standing on their own and quite divorced from any consideration of their relationship to class positionality. Class, as a category of analysis and action was increasingly insignificant as gender and racial differences took center stage.

Moreover, in addition to considerations of race and gender, as Dylan claimed, the times themselves were a-changin’. As early as 1958, Hall had argued that changes within the capitalist system had led to “‘the break up of a “whole way of life” into a series of lifestyles’” in which “‘the worker knows himself much more as a consumer than as a producer’” (Hall, in Sparks 1996, 77). For Hall, writing in 1960, this was not an altogether negative affair. Capitalism had contributed to a change in the standards of living of the working class, providing access to consumer goods and a growing sense of security (in Sparks 1996, 97).

If cultural studies in Britain is viewed as moving away from any class-based analysis, it is frequently argued that cultural studies in the US has always harbored a certain amount of
 antagonism toward Marxism (Agger 1992a; Brantlinger 1990; Eung-Jun Min 1991). Thus, in the US, it is argued that class has received considerably less attention than in Britain (Agger 1992a; Brantlinger 1990; Milner 2002; Min 1991). Further, it is argued that cultural studies in the US has shied away from the concept of ideology, a problem Min attributes to a hostility towards socialism in the US (1991, 83). For Brantlinger, the failure of cultural studies in the US to engage seriously with the concept of ideology resulted in a less critical and less political endeavor (1990).

The succeeding decades have seen additional changes in the nature of capitalism, and in an era which is referred to as “late capitalism,” or a period of “flexible” or “fast” capitalism, worker’s sense of identification with their class position seems to be ever more fragile. As Hall pointed out so long ago, identity today appears to be based far more on habits of consumption than on class. The turn to studies of consumption then, can be read as a reaction to changing times and changing senses of identity. Such a change would seem to warrant reflection and problematizing and should signal the desperate need for, rather than lead to an abandonment of, the concerns of Frankfurt Critical Theory and political economy, and their significance for cultural studies. Consumption does not solve the problems of capitalism and the growing disparity between the haves and have-nots we are currently experiencing, despite the failure of the worker to identify with his class position. To celebrate the glories of consumption uncritically, as when Fiske claims shopping is an empowering moment, “through which people can create or modify the context of everyday life and thus many of the meanings it bears” is to signal the loss of an alternative vision and politics, a compensatory adaptation to the pleasures of unbridled consumption (John Fiske 1989a, 26).
Criticisms of Cultural Studies

The charge that cultural studies has drifted toward an uncritical and celebratory populism is not unique to this study (see Agger 1992a; Thomas Frank 2000; Gitlin 1997; Justin Lewis 1999; McGuigan 1992, 1997; Milner 2002; Morris 1990; Francis Mulhern 2000). Addressing what she refers to as “banality” in cultural studies, Meaghan Morris writes, “I get the feeling that somewhere in some English publisher’s vault there is a master disk from which thousands of versions of the same article about pleasure, resistance, and the politics of consumption are being run off under different names with minor variations” (1990, 21). Morris argues that cultural studies has lost its critical edge and moved toward a non-evaluative relativism in its analyses of popular culture. For Russell Jacoby the move toward a celebratory cultural studies is linked to “the rejection of the term ‘mass culture’ as derogatory and elitist”(1999, 75) and like Morris, he argues that cultural studies has become banal and trite with its “insistence on finding subversion or complexity everywhere” (1999, 81).

These and other criticisms leveled at cultural studies have come from both within the discipline where debates over theoretical approach and method have raged, and from without, particularly from the disciplines of sociology and communications. These critiques can be seen as falling into three particular categories, although each is linked. First, cultural studies is seen as retreating from any Marxist or economic analysis. This criticism is most often linked to a retreat from “metanarratives” and “truth” in general and is most often associated with the Paris uprisings of May 1968, a shift toward a politics that turned toward the self rather than collective struggle, the so-called linguistic or cultural turn and importation of French theory, and the
failures of communism in Europe that shook the faith of the left in the possibility of revolution (Agger 1992a; Black 2002; Robert G. Dunn 1998; Nicholas Garnham 1997; Gitlin 1997; Russell Jacoby 1999; Douglas Kellner 1995; Robert McChesney 1996; Min 1991; Mulhern 1995; John Sanbanmatsu 2004). This influence is already evident in work coming out of the Centre in the 1970s, influencing for example, Hall’s essay on encoding and decoding (first published in 1973), as well as work on subcultures, such as Hebdige’s *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* published in 1979.

Second, cultural studies has been accused of a populism in which value and resistance are seen in all things popular; reception and audience “agency” are lifted from any structural constraint; and pleasure, consumption, and style are equated with political resistance (Agger 1992a; Black 2002; Brantlinger 1990; Marjorie Ferguson and Peter Golding 1997; Frank 1997a; 2000; John Frow 1995; Gitlin 1997; Harris 1992; Kellner 1995; McGuigan 1992; 1997; Mulhern 1995; A. Sivanandan 1989). Often aimed at the excesses of claims that persisted throughout the 1980s and ‘90s and continue to exert influence today (in the work of John Fiske for example) these criticisms again lay much of the blame on the influences of poststructuralism and postmodernism and the turning away from what was viewed as economic determinism.

Lastly has been the charge of textualism, which again is related to the above criticisms. Here it is argued that cultural studies has reverted to studies of texts alone, divorced, once again, from any structure or broader context (Ferguson and Golding 1997; Kellner 1995; Milner 2002; Morley 1997; Luis Rivera-Perez 1996; Colin Sparks 1996; Williams 1989). If true, this would mean cultural studies has come full circle; if Williams, Hoggart, and Thompson sought to locate culture materially within a historical context, it would seem that this thrust within cultural
studies has been abandoned. In conjunction with this charge have come accusations of a use of theoretical jargon which has led to an opacity in cultural studies texts and a “cunning use of inverted commas to convey a notion that terms used carried complex and expanded meanings hidden to all but the tutored reader” (Ferguson and Golding 1997, xxi). Such a use of language again suggests that cultural studies may have come full circle; for if the reaction against elite culture justified the serious treatment of popular culture, it would seem that cultural studies itself has become a form of elite culture. Maria Cevasco states that “in contemporary cultural studies, both culture and politics, whose reunification was one of the advances of Williams’ work, are submitted to a process of abstraction that leaves everyone happy; the theorist’s good conscience is at peace once his or her work is predicated as ‘political’, and the real world of politics is left unscathed by an academicized discourse aimed at fellow professionals” (2000, 436). Arguing that the “neoliberal consensus and the massive ideological victory has taken its toll in the project of cultural studies” she finds little to celebrate in recent work, instead finding “over-specialization, obfuscation and outright celebration of the market” (2000, 436). Critics have also argued that particular conceptual terms, such as Gramsci’s concept of hegemony, have been lifted from their original contexts and have lost all sense of their original meaning (Ferguson and Golding 1997; Harris 1992; Kellner 1995; Morris 1990; Rivera-Perez 1996).

Changing Times and a Loss of Political Will?

The retreat from Marxism, grand theory or metanarratives, is of course, seen in a positive light by many. Fred Inglis, in his book Cultural Studies, announces cheerfully that, “Grand theory by these tokens has had its day. . . .Marxism could hardly aim any longer at revolution . . .
after 1968 faded away. . . not only is it obvious that Marxism can do nothing to prompt action after its spectacular collapse in Eastern Europe; even its diagnostic gives nothing like enough credit to the happiness and satisfaction of desire which capitalism has so abundantly realized” (1993, 151 -152). For Inglis, “there is no way to tell the difference as to truth, edification, or usefulness between grand theory and a personal anthropology” (1993, 154). Thus, he argues cultural studies should take as its task the unearthing of individual stories or narratives.

In what can be seen as a similar move to an individualist notion of the political Angela McRobbie has argued that a return to any “pre-postmodern Marxism . . . is untenable” (1992, 719). For McRobbie politics are no longer to be found in a reductionist Marxism, but, drawing on the work of Laclau, in the radical possibilities of identity. McRobbie argues that:

Identity could be seen as dragging cultural studies into the 1990s by acting as a kind of guide to how people see themselves, not as class subjects, not as psychoanalytic subjects, not as subjects of ideology, not as textual subjects, but as active agents whose sense of self is projected onto and expressed in an expansive range of cultural practices, including texts, images, and commodities. (1992, 730)

And, as with Inglis, the capitalist market economy is seen as opening up new possibilities, for “the free market offers opportunities for new emergent identities and, besides which, capital in the homogenous absolutist way in which we on the left have tended to refer to it, is itself a more fractured and fragile entity” (1992, 724). How this might be true in an age of globalized capital remains unsaid.

For Russell Jacoby, however, the retreat from Marxism signals a loss of faith in collective political struggle. In The End of Utopia, Jacoby writes:

To put it differently, radicalism no longer believes in itself. Once upon a time leftists acted as if they could fundamentally reorganize society. . . . the left now largely speaks the language of liberalism. . . . At best radicals and leftists envision a modified society with bigger pieces of pie for more customers. . . . a fundamental shift in intellectual
sensibilities has taken place, and the distance traveled is most evident in cultural studies. (1999, 10, 70)

Rather than envisioning an alternative to capitalism and the common (there can no longer be a common) good, Jacoby argues that politics now stresses particularity and difference, an acceptance of capitalism as the inevitable and unchangeable state of affairs, and a reduction of the political to individualist experiences of consumption and pleasure within the market system. As Jacoby points out, what we are left with is a rather ahistorical conception which seems to offer no way of thinking things differently.

The retreat from a belief in a broad-based struggle and into a more subjective and individual notion of the political is also seen as a loss of political will by Samuel Farber, Bob Fitch, and John Sanbanmatsu. Each one argues that the youth movements of the 1960s led to an expressivst form of politics and a political romanticism, in which change is focused on the self. For Fitch this is an effect of a Nietzschean postmodernism in cultural studies and elsewhere within the academy. Fitch argues that “Nietzsche dissolves your sense of identification with the oppressed. . . . He promotes detachment” (1998, 49). Further, Fitch argues that while Nietzsche is often seen as critical of Romanticism, he in fact shared a conception of the subject as self-creating artist who creates his own world. Thus, in the sixties there was a shift toward the development of the self and the expression of authenticity, a shift that Fitch argues can still be recognized in the focus upon and celebration of difference, as well as in the failure to provide an intellectual framework for mass political movements (1998, 1-61).

Sanbanmatsu also argues that the countercultural movements of the 1960s and early 1970s were not only a rebellion against modern technocratic society, alienation, and reason; they were also a revolt against certain forms of Marxism (2004, 21). Like Fitch, Sanbanmatsu argues
that there was a shift in emphasis in what was seen as the political, with “the emphasis on self-
transformation . . . melded into the aesthetic project of refashioning and expressing the inner self” (2004, 47). Sanbanmatsu finds that the search for the authentic voice of the subaltern, an essentialist discourse of identity politics, found common ground with poststructuralist discourse by the 1990s, at which point the subaltern could serve as “a transit point or vector for discourse” (2004, 63). Ultimately, he argues, we have moved to a Foucauldian politics of “micropolitical struggles. . . primarily through individual cultural practices” (2004, 129).

Farber offers similar criticisms of the shift that took place in the sixties. While arguing that the new left achieved “enormous victories” and played an important role in ending the war in Vietnam and was “a welcome antithesis to the political decay” of the old left, he nonetheless finds:

The new left stressed subjectivity, spontaneity, structurelessness and expressiveness. . . what had been a fresh and even naive reaction to the many sins of the old left hardened into an unexamined and frozen political posture glorifying irrationalism, know-nothingism, nonresponsive individualism (“do your own thing”) and a hopelessly “romantic” populism that assumed that exploitation and oppression always ennobled its victims and never brutalized them (2000, xi).

For Farber there is what he calls a political romanticism in seeing every action of the oppressed as resistance. He argues that resistance in and of itself is not necessarily political and must be seen within context. To fail to do so is to both flatten the idea of resistance as well as to flatten the concept of the political, giving no action priority over another (2000, 113-125).

Both Ben Agger and Douglas Kellner also argue that the left’s failures in the 1960s and the subsequent postmodern turn have led to an uncritical populism in cultural studies. Agger’s Cultural Studies as Critical Theory (1992a) argues that cultural studies does have a political investment and he sees no reason for its continued existence if it is nothing more than another
Agger identifies what he calls an affirmative, uncritical New York Times postmodernism, a faddish "Manhattanized postmodernism" found "in nearly every avant-garde bookstore, magazine, [and] television show" as well being a theoretical fad that has engulfed the humanities and social sciences (1992a, 169). It is this version of postmodernism that Agger argues has found expression within cultural studies. Against this version of postmodernism he argues for a critical postmodernism, or radicalized, "renegade" postmodernism. Rather than be bound by dichotomies, Agger argues for dialectical postmodernism that engages with Marxism and Frankfurt School theory (1992a; 1992b).
universal liberation of humanity and nature” (1992a, 111). For Agger, a critical postmodern cultural studies must move beyond the realm of the academy into everyday life, breaking down divisions between high and low culture, initiating public discourse, transforming reading practices, and intervening in cultural politics (1992a, 176-196).

Kellner has also argued that the political defeats of the 1960s contributed to a shift and the “proliferation of new discourses emanating from the post-structuralist turn in theory.” These in turn led to what he refers to as “theory wars” (1995, 20) and the depolitization of cultural studies. Yet, against what he sees as a nihilist version of postmodernism with its loss of faith in a revolutionary political movement, Kellner, like Agger, argues for a multiperspectival approach that integrates Marxist, Frankfurt School, feminist, and a positive postmodernist discourse (1995; 1997). However, Kellner’s work, which offers an advance over an approach that ignores Critical Theory entirely by incorporating the Frankfurt theorists emphasis on political economy, still suppresses many of the insights of their work in his attempt to integrate the celebratory attitudes toward popular culture found in cultural studies with a more politically committed stance.

**Grossberg and Garnham: The Crux of the Cultural Studies/Political Economy Divide**

The differences between political economy and cultural studies were clearly drawn in the debate between Nicholas Garnham and Lawrence Grossberg published in *Critical Studies in Mass Communications* (1995). As a media scholar and political economist, Garnham is critical of the rejection of Marxism within contemporary cultural studies, arguing that the founding problematic was “broadly socialist” and citing the work of Williams, Hoggart and Thompson (1995a, 63). By failing to consider cultural practices within the context of production, Garnham
argues that cultural studies has failed to look at the implications of its own analysis and tended to focus on consumption and leisure, exaggerating the freedoms of consumption and ignoring the constraints and limitations upon consumption and meaning making (1995a, 65). Cultural studies has come to see popular cultural practices as inherently resistant, assuming that all “cultural practices of subordinate groups necessarily come into conflict with the structure of domination” (1995a, 67). Such a proposition belies the possibility of false consciousness, that is, accepting that our relation to social reality is a mediated one and that we live under structures of domination which we may not recognize. Thus, identifying what is reactionary and what is progressive becomes necessary. A second point of contention for Garnham is the move from a preoccupation primarily with class in the early work of cultural studies practitioners to a concern with other markers of difference, such as race and gender. For Garnham, these alternative structures are necessarily related to class and can only be understood within that problematic (1995a, 62-71).

In Grossberg’s response to Garnham he claims that cultural studies and political economy were never close and have always been divided over a theory of power and culture. Grossberg contends that critics of cultural studies such as Garnham and McGuigan rely on particular work in cultural studies that fits their argument and ignore work within cultural studies that does attend to economic issues, such as his own. Such an approach gives a distorted view of the cultural studies project, making the position of cultural studies appear silly and inane (1995, 72-73).

Grossberg points to very real differences in the positions of political economy and cultural studies. First, he argues that production within political economy is narrowly conceived;
production is reduced to wage labor and consumption is separated from production. However, in cultural studies there has been an emphasis on how the people themselves are the producers of culture. In the work of John Fiske, for example, it is argued that “popular culture is made by subordinated peoples in their own interests out of resources that also, contradictorily, serve the economic interests of the dominant” (1989a, 2). The dominant group is seen as providing the resources; the subordinate group uses this raw material to create their own meanings. Grossberg also argues that political economy has dismissed consumption as less important than production because it sees production as the determining factor.

Because political economy sees the economic as ultimately the determining factor and culture as a commodity and ideological tool of capitalist interests, Grossberg argues that it is not able to ask questions about what would mobilize opposition and resistance and therefore has no way of conceiving of change. Grossberg also rejects the concept of false consciousness, seeing it as elitist and arguing that there are no authentic interests or truths which intellectuals have privileged access to. He also argues that political economy reduces race and gender issues to economic ones and contends that cultural studies recognizes connections between race, gender, and class but would argue that race and gender are not reducible to class issues (1995, 74-80).

In his response Garnham argues that Grossberg “continues to misrepresent political economy” (1995b, 96). He finds two major points of disagreement with Grossberg; first he cites Grossberg’s contention that class is culturally constructed. While agreeing that individuals and groups do participate in the construction of their own class identities, Garnham argues that these identities do not “arise purely from discourse” but from “real material differences”. Secondly, their disagreement is based “on the question of determination” (1995b, 97). Garnham argues that
while a political economy position does find the mode of production as having determining power, that does not make it reductionist, for it is always changeable and historically contingent (1995b, 97-98).

The issues touched on in the debate between Garnham and Grossberg are further explored in the collection *Cultural Studies in Question*, edited by Marjorie Ferguson and Peter Golding (1997). The contributors to the volume share several common concerns regarding theoretical trends within cultural studies. Again, the divide between political economy and cultural studies is addressed in the essays of Garnham, Kellner, Jim McGuigan, and James Murdock, all of whom call for a cultural studies that integrates the insights of political economy. For Garnham, the focus on consumption within cultural studies has “exaggerated the freedoms of daily life” and fails to examine how pleasure can “be used to manipulative ends” (1997, 60). For these scholars the postmodern turn within cultural studies is associated with an increasing inclination to retreat from questions of judgement and a move toward relativism (Kellner 1997; McGuigan 1997; David Morley 1997). Kellner also argues that the postmodern focus on pleasure has meant that cultural studies has increasingly focused on audience and consumption while neglecting any analysis of production. While claiming to stand in opposition to capitalism, cultural studies is seen as promoting a politics of consumption in which consumption is equated with resistance (Gitlin 1997; Kellner 1997; McGuigan 1997). As Denis McQuail (1997) and McGuigan point out, cultural studies exalts consumerism without engaging the imbalance of power in the cultural marketplace. The emphasis on consumption and pleasure has led to what McGuigan calls a “micro-politics of consumption and local victories”(1997, 141). Gitlin, McGuigan, Murdock, and others identify in contemporary cultural studies an imbalance in which
the emphasis is on the micro and argue that there is a need to integrate an analysis of the macro, that is the economic structures and institutions that give shape to social relations and have some determining effect on cultural practices and the construction of particular meanings.

**John Fiske: All That is Wrong with Cultural Studies**

The work of John Fiske is often cited as exemplifying all that is wrong with cultural studies (Agger 1992a; Frow 1995; Harris 1992; Kellner 1995; McGuigan 1992, 1997; Morris 1990; Mulhern 1995; Rivera-Perez 1996). This is particularly true of the “agency” he grants the audience. Morris, for example, takes Fiske to task for the circularity of his arguments regarding “the people” as both constructing the meaning of cultural texts and “a figure of its own critical activity” (1990, 23). Don Slater argues that one problem with the populist turn in cultural studies is “a refusal, common to both postmodernism and neoliberalism, to pronounce value judgements upon the choices of consumers, upon their needs or wants” (1997, 51). Yet, Slater argues, postmodern criticism, such as the work of Fiske, looks “for and at only the consumption which can somehow be interpreted as progressive” or for Foucauldians, examples of resistance (1997, 53). Such analysis fails to take into account the construction of needs within a market economy, an essential part of any critical theory concerned with political potential.

While it is often acknowledged that Fiske may be an extreme example of populist tendencies, it is also argued that his work has been very influential (Agger 1992a; Hardt 1992; McGuigan 1992; Morley 1996) and, as Mulhern notes, “John Fiske has certainly worked for his

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² Both Morley and Hardt argue that Fiske has proven to be particularly popular in the US. According to Hardt, Fiske’s work is an “ideologically relevant and politically attractive example of a Cultural Studies approach in the American context” (Hardt 1992, 192). Fiske, who was born and educated in Great Britain, and taught in both Great Britain and Australia before moving to the US, is often seen as playing an instrumental role in introducing the
professional notoriety” (1995, 140). Two of Fiske’s works most often cited and criticized are his *Television Culture: Popular Pleasures and Politics* and *Reading the Popular*. Both books, as well as the companion book to *Reading the Popular*, continue to exert a marked influence on work in media and cultural studies with excerpts continuing to be published in anthologies directed toward both fields (see, for example, Harrington and Bielby 2001; Marris and Thornham 2000).

In Fiske’s *Television Culture* (1987), power shifts from the culture industry to the reader; a program becomes a text at the moment of reception and thus is seen as a “producerly text,” that is, it is “written” and given meaning at the moment of reading, not production (1987, 95). Despite attempts to constrain and limit the meanings available through the text and to promote the dominant ideology through the use of particular narrative structures, realism, constructions of character, etc., Fiske argues that television texts remain open and thereby resist closure. In fact, despite paying lip service to the idea that meanings are in some way limited by the text and by the structures designed to promote closure, Fiske seems at the same time to deny that openness is in any way limited. Texts he argues, are polysemic, that is, they have a “multiplicity of meanings” (1987, 15). Fiske also addresses intertextuality, arguing that secondary texts enable us to see how “the primary text can be articulated into the general culture in different ways” (1987, 126). According to Fiske, “not only is the text polysemic in itself, but its multitude of

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3 *Understanding the Popular* was published concurrently with *Reading the Popular* in 1989. It is a companion book and makes the same arguments. According to Fiske, “*Understanding the Popular* moves from theories to readings, *Reading the Popular* from readings to theories” (1989b, ix)

4 This position may be compared to the work of Stuart Hall on encoding and decoding, which I discuss in chapter four.
intertextual relations increases its polysemic potential” (1987, 127). Texts carry within them an excess of meanings that break loose from the boundaries of preferred readings and are read by the reader within the context of their own lives and social positions. For Fiske, popular culture becomes a semiotic democracy in which the reader takes pleasure in creating his/her own meanings and in resisting the dominant ideology (1987, 19). Fiske grants epistemic privilege to anyone in a subordinate position, arguing that subordinate groups, in light of their positionality, are able to both perceive their own interests and recognize that those interests are in conflict with the powerful (1987, 310). The end result, in Fiskes’ work, is a concept of audiences unconstrained by ideology and social constraints and texts as emancipatory and pleasurable.

Fiske turns to Barthes’ concepts of *plaisir* and *jouissance* to argue that “pleasure is opposed to ideological control” (1987, 228). Pleasure is automatically seen as a progressive end in itself. Pleasure, Fiske asserts, comes from “resisting, evading, or offending” television’s power, of playing with the text and assuming control by creating meanings that serve our own purpose (1987, 230). Fiske identifies several devices which open up texts to polysemic readings; irony, metaphor, and jokes work through a “collision of discourses” and thereby create “an explosion of meaning that cannot be controlled” (1987, 87, 89). Contradictions occur in texts because they cannot be repressed. Excess takes two forms; camp and semiotic excess, i.e., that there “is too much meaning . . . to be controllable” (1987, 91). Drawing on Bakhtin’s work, Fiske also argues that television contains elements of the carnivalesque in the form of wrestling matches, for example. In contemporary culture, style has replaced the carnivalesque, but it too is excessive, offensive, and “essentially liberating” (1987, 249).

The primary concern for Fiske in *Reading the Popular* (1989a) is pleasure. He begins his
argument by saying that popular culture is “made by various formations of subordinated or
disempowered people out of the resources, both discursive and material, that are provided by the
social system that disempowers them” (1989a, 1-2), an argument based on the work of de
Certeau. Thus, just as he argued in *Televison Culture* that texts are produced at the moment of
reading, he now argues that the dominant group produces the raw materials for the production of
popular culture by the people. Because such cultural commodities, like television texts in his
previous work, serve the interests of both the dominant group and the subordinate, they are
inherently conflictual and contradictory to the core.

Pleasure, he argues, is found in the subordinates reading of various texts and in their
creation of meanings. Fiske argues that popular culture is made in relation to structures of
dominance and that this relationship can be seen in two forms; one form is evasion, which is the
most pleasurable and the second is resistance in which the production of meaning proceeds
pleasure. The pleasure of evasion, which Fiske identifies as a bodily pleasure, as jouissance,
comes from the “refusal of the dominant ideology and its discipline,” from excess and the
carnivalesque (1989a, 8). This evasion forms the basis for resistance. In his chapter on “Reading
the Beach,” Fiske argues that the surfer is one such deviant who resists social discipline. The
surfer is one with nature, refusing the constraints of culture, and knows pleasure in this evasion.
This pleasure is an agent of subversion, for, Fiske argues, the desires of the body, pleasure and
jouissance, that which is beyond sense, are also outside of ideology and social control and thus
resistant to hegemony (1989a, 43-76).

Drawing on de Certeau’s work on reading and everyday life, Fiske argues that resistance
involves the subordinate group using the cultural commodity produced by the dominant group to
create their own meanings. Resistance, for Fiske, is found everywhere, in shopping, surfing, at the beach. Fantasy is also seen as a form of resistance. In creating their own meanings and through fantasy, Fiske argues subordinate groups feel empowered and raise their sense of self-esteem, which he sees as a necessary prerequisite to social change. According to Fiske, this resistance at the micro level, within our everyday lives is not radical, but it is progressive (1989a, 122-123). Thus everyday acts, such as shopping, can be seen as "an oppositional, competitive act" which offers women a "source of achievement, self-esteem, and power" (1989a, 19).

It is easy to see how Fiske’s work has led to accusations of populism and relativism. Jackie Stacey cautions against a naive populism, found in cultural studies, arguing that "pleasure and activity should not simply be celebrated . . . ‘Activity’ in and of itself is not a form of resistance” (1994, 47). Suzanna Walters argues that unless we remain aware that for the most part we read texts within the prescribed codes of the dominant ideology we will tend to celebrate all texts as sites of pleasure and resistance, and critique will be pushed aside (1995, 112).

Luis Rivera-Perez is also concerned with the celebration of resistance and the subsequent retreat from ideological analysis. In his essay, “Rethinking Ideology”, Fiske is taken to task for his failure to situate audience agency within a broader social context and to locate audiences outside the reach of ideology. Rivera-Perez argues that the influence of post-modernist and post-structuralist theory that became evident within the academy in the latter part of the 1980s precipitated a shift within cultural studies. This shift signaled the rejection of ideology as a “totalizing categorization,” and the move away from what was seen as “grand

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5 The essay by Rivera-Perez is concerned with Fiske’s *Television Culture*, *Reading the Popular*, and *Understanding Popular Culture*. 
theory” turned the focus of cultural studies away from an analysis of the effects of ideology within cultural texts and toward a model which understood the meaning of texts as a process of negotiation. The work of John Fiske is seen as exemplary of this move within cultural criticism and Rivera-Perez argues that inadequate attention has been given to Fiske’s move “beyond ideology” (1996, 39).

Rivera-Perez contends that while Fiske argues that television narratives are a site of tension between closure and openness, the text, in his work, becomes an empty structure, while he celebrates reception “as the moment of people’s creativity and popular empowerment” (1996, 41). Problematic in this conception is Fiske’s tendency to see viewers as autonomous subjects, able to create their own meanings outside of the dominant ideology. Fiske, Rivera-Perez argues, is ultimately as reductionist as those he argues against, failing to account for the “tension between human agency” and “the social conditions that shape and constrain their subjectivity and meaning making” (1996, 43).

Rivera-Perez also argues that, despite Fiske’s rhetoric, he fails to recognize the complexity of Gramsci’s notion of hegemony. Thus, in Fiske’s work people always resist and the dominant power becomes ineffective. He fails to account for how, in Gramsci, the dominant power accommodates resistance and incorporates the interests of the subordinate group, thus undermining threats to the power structure and maintaining equilibrium. Rivera-Perez also points to the problems inhering in Fiske’s concept of pleasure and his retreat from ideology. First, he points to Fiske’s notion that people can, due to their subordination, recognize their own interests and seemingly automatically resist what is in conflict with these interests. Secondly, the desire for pleasure, an almost biological drive, ensures an “oppositional and progressive popular
culture” (1996, 47). Again, Rivera-Perez points out that despite frequent mention of the social conditions shaping the meanings people will make, in reality Fiske’s argument positions audiences as “abstract,” rather than as historically situated and constrained individuals. Fiske’s argument that pleasure is somehow beyond ideology suggests that pleasure exists outside of any historical situatedness or ideological structure. He fails to explain just how we might understand this. Rivera-Perez argues that it is necessary to rethink the tension between social determinants and the space for creativity for it is a “crucial moment of the struggles for hegemony” (1996, 52). Basically, Rivera-Perez is arguing that while we can say that audiences are active producers of meaning, we cannot say that these meanings somehow are free of and outside of ideology. Nor can we assume that the possibility for the production of meaning is always progressive and therefore cause for celebration.

Jim McGuigan has also taken Fiske to task for what he calls cultural populism. In his oft-cited book, *Cultural Populism* (1992), McGuigan identifies four main critical themes. First, he identifies an uncritical populism in cultural studies which celebrates the ability of people to make use of available symbolic resources to create their own meanings and pleasures and argues that such a micro-politics is seen as so significant that it has called larger emancipatory projects into question (1992, 171). Secondly, McGuigan argues that “cultural populism’s solidarity with ordinary people has become increasingly sentimental” such that cultural studies research has tended to ignore disconfirming instances in which “the people’ do not measure up to sentimental expectations,” that is, McGuigan argues that cultural studies has romanticized the image of the people as being inherently resistant and progressive (1992, 171-172). Third, the divide between the micro and the macro, the focus on the text at the expense of the contexts of
production have limited the explanatory power of cultural studies (1992, 172). Lastly, McGuigan argues that the uncritical drift within cultural studies is connected to postmodernism, the collapse of metanarratives, and the loss of conviction in rational grounds of critique. This move has resulted in an anti-judgemental relativism which fails to evaluate how an uncritical populism might converge with the interests of capitalism (1992, 172-173).

While McGuigan’s work takes into consideration the work of Paul Willis, Dick Hebdige, and Angela McRobbie, he cites John Fiske’s work on television and popular culture as most exemplary of what he has identified as cultural populism. McGuigan argues that Fiske separates the cultural economy from the financial economy, “bracketing off history, macro-politics and economics.” While paying lip service to the role of capitalism and hegemony, for Fiske these concepts have no analytical function as the readings of texts by marginalized groups are inherently resistant and “never complicit with any kind of domination” (1992, 72, 73). For McGuigan, Fiske’s work “represents a drastic narrowing of vision” in which the emphasis on signification is removed from the site of material production. Despite the fact that he identifies Fiske as holding an “‘outer limit’ position,” McGuigan sees Fiske’s work as important in that it has had an extensive influence (1992, 73, 74). McGuigan argues that Fiske has “raided and sanitized” the theories of somewhat incompatible authorities, including Bakhtin, de Certeau, Foucault, and Hall to support his views (1992, 72).

In his essay, “Cultural Populism Revisited,” McGuigan extends his critique of cultural populism and again criticizes the work of Fiske. Here McGuigan seeks to “deepen the critique of consumptionist cultural populism . . . founded upon the mythology of sovereign consumption” (1997, 140). First McGuigan attacks the notion of consumer sovereignty, arguing that the idea of
sovereignty depends on perfect knowledge of what is available for consumption and rational choice, with consumption determining production. Opposed to this position is one which argues that such knowledge is not possible and that consumption is, at least in part, determined by suppliers, by what is made available to consumers and through advertising. Additionally, McGuigan argues that “there is a false equalization in the claim that we are all sovereign consumers,” as some of us “are more sovereign than others” (1997, 143). McGuigan argues that material advantage privileges some of us as does our own cultural competency. Further, McGuigan argues that the very notion of consumer sovereignty is indicative of a “‘post-Marxist accommodation to capitalism” and a postmodern “refusal to . . . conceptualize consumption in more visceral and situated ways” (1997, 143, 144). Arguing that for Fiske “contemporary sources of resistance and opposition somehow derive . . . from the popular consumption and meaningful transformation of mass-distributed cultural products in the marketplace,” McGuigan finds Fiske to be narrowly focused “on the micro-politics of consumption and defeats of everyday life, provid[ing] little space for transformative struggle” (1997, 140, 141).

John Frow has also made arguments that can easily be applied to the work of Fiske and his notion that subordinate groups can somehow, inherently, read against the grain. Criticizing the work of de Certeau, from which Fiske draws in his Reading the Popular, Frow argues:

To define the popular in terms of appropriation (popular regimes of reading, the ‘subversive’ and ‘tactical’ ruses that Certeau describes) has the theoretical drawback of supposing that a set of dominated classes has developed quite separate and autonomous practices of reading from those employed by the dominant class: that the popular, far from being the site of struggle for hegemony, has escaped all hegemonic influence (1995, 83).

Here Frow points to a rather interesting paradox within cultural studies. While academics in the field have been loath to grant epistemic privilege to the dominant class or their own positions,
perhaps out of a fear of being seen as elitist, they have had no problem granting such privilege to subordinate groups. There is an assumption here that, as Farber has pointed out, oppression is somehow ennobling and inherently provides a perspective unavailable to those not similarly oppressed.

As with McGuigan and Rivera-Perez, Frow is also critical of the lifting of consumption from the context of production, citing Fiske as an example:

The inadequacy of an affirmative conception of popular culture becomes particularly salient when it is translated into the disciplinary structures of cultural studies. Let me take as one influential example that can stand for many the work of John Fiske. For Fiske, the category of popular culture in advanced capitalist societies is defined not by its industrial mode of production but by the extent to which cultural products are able to ‘bear the interests of the people’. There is a strict separation between the industrial and cultural economies, between commodities and the uses made of them (1995, 60-61).

Frow is also critical of Fiske’s contention that bodily pleasure is “a priori subversive” or that oppositional readings of television texts offer any real challenge to the broader society or capitalism (1995, 63). For Frow, Fiske simplifies complex arguments and makes contradictory claims about both texts and audiences.

David Morley is also critical of the idea that the audience is always active. Morley argues that Hall’s encoding/decoding model in which Hall argued that there was a preferred reading that the text lends itself to, a negotiated reading through which the audience both accepts and resists portions of the encoded meaning, and an oppositional reading which challenges the codes contained within the text has been transformed to the point that “the majority of audience members routinely modify or deflect any dominant ideology” (1997, 124). This has led to “an unhelpful romanticization of ‘consumer freedoms’ which forgets the very question of cultural power” and an underestimation of the constraints on meaning and determinancy within texts
In David Harris’s *From Class Struggle to a Politics of Pleasure*, there is also a concern with a model being taken from its original context and losing all sense of its original meaning. Harris’s argument is concerned with the use made of the work of Gramsci within cultural studies. Harris argues that in order to adapt the work of Gramsci it has been necessary to lift parts of his work and ignore other parts; thus there has been a “symptomatic reading of Gramsci and an invariably partial one” (1992, 24). He also argues that Gramsci’s work needs to be considered within the particular context in which it was written. Harris finds the use of Gramsci’s notion of hegemony within cultural studies to be particularly problematic. He argues that Gramsci’s notion has been enriched and elaborated upon. And, with the postmodern turn, there has been an attempt to integrate aspects of Foucault’s work on power. However, in the end, Gramsci’s conception of hegemony has become unrecognizable. As in the case of Hall’s encoding/decoding model, Harris argues that the focus within cultural studies has been on counter-hegemony, not on the ways in which hegemony is retained. Again, Harris argues that this has led to romanticizing everything as resistance and he is particularly critical of the romanticization of youth subcultures, deviance, posturing, and style.

In the work of Fiske, Harris finds “an almost total inversion of the critical stance towards consumerism” and “a new celebration of the joys and empowerments to be found in private, unofficial, even rather scandalous and unorganized consumption” (1992, 166). For Harris, as the title of his book suggests, the turn from Marxism and Critical Theory has signaled a turn from macro to micro-politics, from “class struggle to a politics of pleasure” (1992).

A later work by Fiske, *Media Matters: Everyday Culture and Political Change* (1994), is
primarily concerned with the issue of race, racism, and the mainstream American media. This work should not be read as signaling a retreat from his work stressing audience agency. Fiske continues to argue that we each read the media from our own particular positionality. However, the core of his argument is that particular voices are privileged over others and are therefore more accessible. To make his argument, Fiske analyzes what he refers to as “media events,” such as the debate between Murphy Brown and Dan Quayle, the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas hearings, the L.A. riots, and the O.J. Simpson case.

Relying on Baudrillard’s concept of simulacra and the hyperreal Fiske argues that in a postmodern world there is a blurring of distinctions between the “real” and “fiction,” and that there is such a promiscuity of images that none can ultimately be seen as “truth.” Fiske claims that “we can no longer rely on a stable relationship or clear distinction between a ‘real’ event and its mediated representation” (1994, 2). Thus, he argues, the media creates “figures,” human simulacrum such as Murphy Brown, but also Rodney King, who are only real to us as media constructions. The debate between “Brown” and Quayle is an example of what Fiske identifies as a media event, an event that sparked widespread media coverage and attention. The debate also reflects the contestation between discourses; the emergent discourse of the new woman made audible in the figure of Murphy Brown and the discourse of “family values” voiced by Quayle. However, Fiske argues, in the debate between Brown and Quayle other meanings of Quayle’s attack were repressed, for example, the racial meanings carried within white understandings of “family values,” that is, the threat of welfare mothers.

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6 Throughout his text Fiske employs the practice so often found in cultural studies of using inverted commas to problematize particular words, drawing attention to their use and the associated meanings we tend to take for granted (1994, 169).
According to Fiske, lurking underneath mainstream representations of figures such as Clarence Thomas, O.J. Simpson, and Rodney King, is the continued fear of the untamed black male whose sexuality and violence pose a threat to white womanhood and law and order. In both the Thomas/Hill and Simpson cases, Fiske argues that the media tended to downplay racial issues, focusing instead on issues of gender. By repressing racial meanings Fiske contends that the deep racial divisions within American culture are displaced allowing both the white liberal media and the white audience to focus on what Fiske sees as the less contentious issue of gender. While Fiske’s argument that the media representations of these events are tainted by their sublimated racism is convincing, and I would argue not particularly new, there are times that his argument seems to be strained in his attempt to make what Grahame Griffin refers to as “a racial- and sexual-mountain out of a molehill” (1995, 2). For example, Fiske’s argument that the white Bronco Simpson was driving during the televised police chase served as a “signifier of white society,” white technology and power made available to all, as well as that “articulating a bronco with a black man (even through the unspoken word buck with both)” activated meanings linked in the white imagination of untamed black male sexuality might be seen as a bit of a stretch (Fiske 1996, 259).

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7 In the case of Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas as well as O.J. Simpson, Fiske argues that feminists successfully turned the media focus toward issues of gender, displacing racial issues and black voices. In the case of Anita Hill feminists turned media attention toward the issue of sexual harassment, in the case of O.J. toward domestic violence. Fiske has a tendency to portray all feminists as white. He seems to reluctantly acknowledge that many black feminists supported Hill’s exposure of her harassment, even if such exposure meant airing problems within the black community, thereby airing dirty laundry to a white audience. In the case of Simpson, Fiske argues that had Nicole Simpson not been white, the media would have been less obsessed with the event. Here, of course, Fiske is pursuing his argument of the white imagination and the threat of the black male to the white woman. However, this would tend to suggest that feminists would not have taken up the cause or that O.J.’s celebrity alone would not have been sufficient to attract media attention, an argument I find unconvincing.

8 This comment refers to the 1996 revised edition of Media Matters in which Fiske expands upon his original argument concerning the Simpson case.
Fiske’s arguments concerning the relativising of truth and the significance of voice are more closely tied to the broader concerns of my argument. Throughout Media Matters, Fiske argues that some meanings are repressed because some voices are repressed, particularly the voice of the subaltern. For Fiske there are “Black knowledges” and white knowledges and black knowledge, or the black voice is largely absent from the mainstream media and thereby essentially inaccessible to the white audience. According to Fiske, whites need to listen to these black voices and to see the world from their point of view. Here, I would argue, Fiske’s argument becomes complex or even contradictory. For, if, as Fiske contends, we each read media texts from our own position within the social structure, and, as Fiske contends, blacks distrust white voices and the mainstream media, what is it that might motivate the white audience to listen to these voices? The call for voice is also symptomatic of the expressivist politics discussed by Sanbanmatsu, in which as he argues such calls for an authentic voice seldom query the result of such calls, that is, they fail to ask who is listening (2004).

Fiske’s conception of “Black knowledges” can also be read as problematic, for it suggests, as Frow pointed out, that oppression inherently leads to a particular knowledge or epistemic privilege. Another problem, as Griffin points out, is Fiske’s relativising of all “truth,” and therefore all voices. So, for example, while Fiske allows “it may not be true, or provable that O.J. actually was framed by white extremists,” as some blacks claim, it is “part of a broader truth that is explicit in Black knowledge of contemporary race relations” (1994, xix). The relativising of all truth becomes even more problematic in Fiske’s chapter on AIDS and Black Liberation

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9 Access to this knowledge is apparently inaccessible (or at least may be lost) as blacks move up the social ladder. See Fiske’s comments regarding Oprah Winfrey.
Radio, which, Fiske argues, offers Blacks the opportunity to define a black reality and construct counterknowledges that challenge the official white knowledge or “truth.” One such “truth” is that AIDS was purposely propagated by the white community to enact genocide on Blacks. Again, Fiske argues that the objective truth of this claim is irrelevant. Rather, what is important is for whites to understand why a large number of blacks might subscribe to this version of truth. As Griffin argues without some sense of discrimination and value in regard to the concepts of reality and truth, we are left with nothing more than the rallying cries of particular voices “for extremists of all complexions” (1995, 3). Additionally, I would argue that Fiske’s position leads him to denigrate what he sees as “white truths” and romanticize what he refers to as “Black truths” or voices.10

Fiske’s work exemplifies the desire to focus on an unfettered human agency; it also exemplifies a retreat from what was seen as an elitist position that denigrated mass culture such as that of the Frankfurt theorists. However, in its desire to validate popular tastes and pleasures, much of this work has fallen into a non-judgemental relativism which accepts popular tastes as somehow immune to the influence of ideology and fails to examine how those tastes, pleasure and desires are constructed and realized within the social relations of advanced capitalism. The implications of these arguments can be interrogated by exploring how this logic has been played out in reality television, which I turn to in chapter two.

10 For example, in his discussion of the L.A. “riots,” Fiske is quick to point out how the mainstream press used language to frame blacks as lawless “looters,” and this was certainly the case. He also argues that “looter’s” voices were repressed in the mainstream media, and again this is by and large true. Further he argues that had “looters” been allowed to speak that they would have framed themselves as “warriors” or freedom fighters. I would argue that while there is no denying the actions in L.A. had political dimensions, and were related to pent up frustrations over years of injustice, to paint the events and actions as completely altruistic is every bit as problematic as to paint the events as solely motivated by lawlessness.
CHAPTER TWO

SITUATING REALITY TV

[Survivor] is as much a marketing vehicle as it is a television show. My shows create an interest, and people will look at them, but the end game here is selling products in stores – a car, deodorant, running shoes. It’s the future of television.

– Mark Burnett, in Andrejevic 2004

The phenomenon of prime time reality television hit the US in 2000 with the success of Survivor, which debuted on CBS in May of that year, following on the heels of ABC’S successful game show Who Wants to Be a Millionaire which first aired in late 1999. While some form of reality programming has been around since the early days of broadcasting, such as Candid Camera, which first aired on TV in 1948, the year 2000 marked a turning point in which reality programming captured America’s imagination. Networks quickly jumped on the bandwagon, as reality programming offered high ratings and reduced production costs. Reality programming has continued to proliferate. It has been both denounced as trash TV and praised as opening up a space for public interaction and the democratization of television. There is little doubt that no matter which view one holds, reality television has been wildly popular and has contributed to changes in the business model of television programming.

This chapter briefly addresses my rationale for selecting reality TV as an artifact through which to think about particular arguments within cultural studies. My interest is not in a fully exploring of the phenomena of reality TV in its multiple varieties and formats, but in using reality TV as a lens through which to investigate selective claims. Secondly, this chapter seeks to situate the current crop of reality programming through a review of selected scholarly literature, much of which is concerned with the history of the genre, as well as its definition. The
popularity of reality programming has spurred several recent collections and an entire anthology devoted to *Survivor*. Work on the current crop of reality television programming has only just begun, and it is fair to assume that there will be an outpouring of such work over the next few years.

**Why Reality TV?**

As a primary focus within cultural studies has been popular culture, it seems entirely fitting that I should choose one of the most popular genres on television to act as a foil against which my discussions of the debates within cultural studies might be played out. Whether one views the popularity of reality TV to be a result of a forced popularity created by an industry anxious to boost profit margins, consumer demand, or both, reality programming continues to draw audience share. The fifteenth season (two per year) of *Survivor, Survivor: China*, which premiered September 20, 2007, had the lowest opening ratings in the history of the series, yet was still the top Nielson rated program for the night, landing CBS in first place. Game show based “reality” programming, such as *Let’s Make a Deal*, is also on the comeback as costs for producing other reality shows, such as *Survivor*, are increasing. Cable networks, such as HGTV and TLC, can easily fill their schedules with lifestyle programming that seems to run on a loop, with the same programs being continually recast. With the ever-present threat of a writers’ strike looming on the horizon, it seems unlikely that networks will abandon their golden goose, or that reality TV will disappear from the evening line-up anytime soon.

Thus, the popularity of reality programming would seem to offer the perfect site for arguments regarding the shortcomings of a celebratory, cultural populism within cultural studies.
In fact, reality television would appear to be a cultural studies dream come true. If transgression is seen as inherently subversive, then reality television should be seen as inherently subversive. First, reality TV transgresses the limitations of genre, that is, it is textually subversive in that it is a hybrid form, blending multiple television genres, such as documentaries and game shows. It can also be seen as transgressing the limitations of the television screen itself, in that it exceeds those boundaries and crosses into other media, such as the internet. Thus, it is intertextual and/or multiplatform; *Survivor* losers discuss their experience on morning talk shows; *Big Brother* can be watched on our television screens or we can watch the *Big Brother* house live via the internet twenty-four hours a day. Reality television can also be seen as transgressive in that it consistently must push the envelope; for reality programming to attract viewers it must continually offer something newer and more outrageous. Thus, in reality programming contestants are encouraged to engage in “transgressive” behaviors, such as drinking pig’s blood and eating cockroaches on *Fear Factor* or swapping wives on *Wife Swap*. Fox network’s *Who’s Your Daddy*, in which a young woman is offered a cash prize if she can correctly identify her biological father amongst a group of imposters, was seen as going to such an offensive extreme that it was pulled after only one airing as adoption agencies and children’s rights groups maligned the show’s premise. It probably didn’t help that the first adoptee was exposed not only as a reality-show veteran but also a soft-porn star. That reality television is in many respects “transgressive” would seem to be inarguable. What is arguable is the nature of this transgression and whether transgression can be read as a subversion of norms in any substantive way. I argue that reality programming demonstrates the commodification of transgression; *Fear Factor* provides an example of how quickly taboos are normalized and marketed for entertainment and
pleasure; *Wife Swap* offers a chance to examine transgression as a recuperation of the law, as the culmination of the swap is the happy reunion of the married couples. The invocation of transgression in both programs is designed to solicit ratings; the overly romantic conception of transgression needs to be refigured in an era that markets outlawry.

Reality television can also be seen as opening up new possibilities in relation to our understanding of the concept of audience agency and the active audience. Reality television encourages viewers to participate in a variety of ways: by becoming contestants, through voting on who will remain on a program thereby influencing a program’s outcome, by active participation on web sites, and through identification with the program’s contestants, who, we are told, are ordinary people like ourselves. Given the argument that audiences construct their own meanings in the readings of texts, reality television seems to signify a shift in which audience agency might be located in both the production and reading of texts. To what extent, then, does reality TV offer any real empowerment or democratization and to what extent does audience participation provide an illusion of freedom which does little more than serve the needs of the market? In my discussion I consider arguments about the program *Big Brother*, contrasting the view of the program as democratizing with the Andrejevic’s view of *Big Brother*’s promise of agency as illusory and connecting the promises of interactivity with the normalization of surveillance. In my discussion of *American Idol* I suggest that the interactivity on offer in reality programming is less about consumer control than it is about milking profits as interactivity has less to do with democratizing television than with brand extension. *Idol* stages the complete commodification of culture in which even the performers are nothing more than brands. Interactivity has changed the business of television, providing new sources of income via text
Lastly, lifestyle programming provides the opportunity to examine cultural studies arguments regarding consumption. In opposition to the claim that class has been superseded by consumption choices in the process of identity construction I argue that class remains evident and continues to inform both our consumption choices and sense of self. This is made evident in lifestyle programming; from cooking shows to home decor and personal makeover programs, class and the lack of cultural capital are foregrounded as experts provide advice on how to appear to be more than what one is. Secondly, these programs point to the implications of cultural studies arguments regarding resistance via the use of commodities as well as the consumer as creative artists constructing their identities from an array of consumer choices. Rather than offering the creative potential to create new identities which breach the boundaries of class, or other core markers of identity as supposed by cultural studies, programs such as *What Not to Wear* reveal the desire to conform to middle class standards of taste; the desire to be unique is countered by the desire to fit in. The self on offer is a mix-and-match marketed identity.

**Locating Reality TV**

As Annette Hill has argued, there is not a singular definition of reality TV. Rather, there are many competing definitions of the reality genre (2005, 55). In part, the difficulty in “defining” reality TV lies in the fact that the genre draws from, and is a hybrid of, multiple earlier genres, such as documentary and game shows. The many hybrid genres and subgenres may seem to have little in common, and earlier definitions may seem dated when considering the
This type of programming is also called “infotainment,” or “tabloid TV” (see Hill 2005, 24). Also referred to as “factual television,” “popular factual television,” or “factual entertainment,” the term “reality TV,” was first used in the American television industry to describe programming which appealed to the “raw,” as opposed to cooked, or scripted programming (Corner 2004, 290; Hill 2005, 44). While most scholars argue that what we now call reality TV has always been with us (Baker 2003; Corner 2004; Friedman 2002; Hill 2005; Holmes and Jermyn 2004), they also concede that the format really arrived in Europe in the late 1990s and was soon followed in the US, moving into prime time viewing hours and appealing to a broad audience – especially, the coveted 18-34 year old demographic. The phenomenal growth of the reality format can be viewed as coming in waves or phases. A familiarity with these phases can help us understand how definitions of reality TV can easily become inadequate when applied to an ever-evolving genre.

Both John Corner (2004, 291-292) and Hill (2005, 24-38) have identified three phases, or waves of reality programming. For both the first phase is associated with crime and emergency service programming, dating to the 1980s, and popular in the US, Britain, and elsewhere. America’s Most Wanted, which premiered on Fox in 1988, and Cops, another Fox production which premiered in 1989, as well as Crimewatch UK which premiered in 1984, are exemplary of this phase of reality TV1. This programming often involves “raw” footage of police chases and arrests, but may also include reenactments, as well as commentary.

A second phase is associated with the “docusoap” format, a hybrid of observational, fly-on-the-wall documentary and British style soap opera, focusing on the lives of ordinary people

\[\text{footnote}1\text{This type of programming is also called “infotainment,” or “tabloid TV” (see Hill 2005, 24).}\]
doing ordinary things. The docusoap format was extremely popular in Britain during the mid and latter part of the 1990s and remains so today, although the format was far less successful in the United States. For Corner, an explanation for the failure of this format can be explained by the history of dramatic television in the US, which, he argues, is primarily concerned with the lives of the rich (2004, 292). Hill, on the other hand, argues that “American reality TV championed the ordinary person doing extraordinary things, [while] in Britain the opposite was the case,” with, for example, 12 million viewers watching *The Driving School*, a program about a fifty-plus housewife trying to pass her driving exam (2005, 29).

Hill also locates a second type of reality programming within this second wave, lifestyle programming, which, like the docusoap, dominated prime time TV in Britain during the late 1990s. This type of programming, now also very popular in the US, often involves some type of makeover, or do-it-yourself project, and usually involves an ordinary person who receives help or advice from an expert or celebrity. These programs may involve gardening, cooking, fashion, or home improvement, and may incorporate elements from game shows (2005, 29-30). Exemplary of this type of format is the BBC production, *Changing Rooms*, which premiered in the UK in 1996. Lifestyle programming has also proven to be successful in the world market. *Changing Rooms* can also provide an example of the sale of a particular program format to a broader market, which can then adapt the program to local tastes. The format for *Changing Rooms* has been adapted to both the American and Australian market and other parts of the world (Hill 2005, 30, 39). As discussed in chapter five, lifestyle programming has given birth to whole cable channels, such as HGTV and the Style Network.

Lastly, Corner and Hill identify a third phase of reality programming. For Corner this last
phase includes lifestyle programming, as well as new combinations and variants which mix elements from earlier phases, as well as other formats (such as talent shows), with game shows, and combine elements of the “‘real’ with the self-declared and openly performative ‘artificial’” (2004, 292). Hill also sees this third wave as related to game shows, often involving the placement of ordinary people in “controlled environments over extended periods of time” (2005, 24). Thus, both Corner and Hill argue that the explosion of reality programming in the last five years can be attributed to the genre’s ability to constantly renew itself, incorporating new elements and variations from existing genres. In chapter three I return to the theme of the genre’s renewal and crossing of genre boundaries as a form of transgression.

Attempts to define reality TV reflect the changing and evolving nature of the reality genre. As Su Holmes and Deborah Jermyn point out, early definitions tended to emphasize a “focus on ‘real life’ and ‘real people’ as the crucial criteria, as well as the technological forms through which this subject matter was mediated” (2004, 4-5). Thus, reality TV was most often connected to the use of raw or authentic footage, the capture of real life events, dramatized reconstructions, and the use of video cameras, the qualities often associated with Cops-type programming (see Bondebjerg 1996; Dovey 2000; Fetveit 2002; Kilborn 1994; Nichols 1994). Bill Nichols identifies reality TV with programming that “present[s] dangerous events, unusual situations, or actual police cases, often re-enacting aspects of them” (1994, 45). Clearly, these definitions no longer apply to many of the programs currently sold as reality programs, which often rely on sophisticated production techniques and have nothing to do with emergency services.

Rather than pin down an exact definition, recent work on the reality genre has
emphasized particular traits or characteristics common to the many formats lumped under the reality umbrella. For James Friedman these characteristics include, “participants who are not actors, minimal scripting, and drama or narrative created through structure and editing” (2002, 7). Similarly, Susan Murray and Laurie Ouelette identify the use of non-actors and minimal scripting as defining characteristics of reality programming (2004, 2). However, as Mark Andrejevic points out these characteristics are “routinely violated” with “the appearance of well-known actors on celebrity reality shows” (2004, 64). Another problem is delineating what reality TV is not. Andrejevic, for example, argues that sports programming, political debates and other programs are by and large unscripted, but are not considered reality TV (2004, 64). In her own attempt to locate reality TV, Annette Hill argues that the “one defining characteristic that unites the disparate group of programmes that make up the reality genre it is the capacity to let viewers see for themselves” (2005, 55).

It has also been argued that the broad use of the term reality TV has little to do with any defining characteristic, but is, rather, a marketing and promotional tool (Brenton and Cohen 2003; Friedman 2002; Hill 2004; Murray 2004). Friedman argues that the “proliferation of reality-based programs in the year 2000 does not represent a fundamental shift in television programming, but the industry’s reliance on ‘reality’ as a promotional marketing tool is unprecedented” (2002, 7). As he points out the term is now used indiscriminately, applied to everything from talk shows to game shows. Hill also argues that the success of reality programming led to more “frequent use” of the term as it evoked a “particular type of television” and is “instantly recognizable.” Thus, she argues programming that might be categorized in a more traditional category, was “labeled reality TV when beneficial to the industry” (2005, 45-
Susan Murray also discusses the market value of the term, noting the easy slippage between genres. The program, *American High*, for example, was sold to Fox as a reality program. The program, which involved following the lives of a group of students in a Chicago high school, first aired on Fox in the summer of 2000, and was marketed as providing access to real life and real families. Cancelled after four episodes, the program was later sold to PBS as a documentary (Murray 2004, 45-49).

Much of the scholarly work on reality television has been concerned with locating and defining the genre within a historical context. This work tends to argue that reality programming is not new and the precursors of today’s reality show phenomena can be located in documentary, game shows, crime dramas, and even sitcoms. Sam Brenton and Rueben Cohen claim that documentaries can be seen as the forerunners of the current spate of reality programming. They argue that with the move in the 1960s toward personal liberation rather than a concern with community, and with the voice of experience as arbiter of truth, there was a subsequent move in documentary form which privileged social actors over social issues. Thus, they argue, the docusoap, a hybrid of the documentary and soap operas, represents the “final abandonment” of the “sobriety” of documentary “in favor of a relaxed basking in gossip and banality” (2003, 37). Programs such as *The Real World* pushed the docusoap form toward what we now refer to as reality programming, integrating the purely observational techniques of the docusoap with aspects of the game show; *The Real World* created an artificial environment, cast participants to lead to personal conflict, and included “first-person monologues to the camera,” a standard of

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*The Real World* first aired on MTV in 1992. The program involves placing a group of strangers in a house in a particular city and monitoring their daily lives and interactions. The program reveals the ups and downs experienced by the individual house members as they pursue their dreams, as well as the tensions that arise between house members.

Other scholars have linked reality television to earlier television programming. Sean Baker, for instance, traces contemporary programming to a long history of dramatic reenactments of “real-life” beginning in the 1950s with programs such as *Dragnet*, which emphasized that the episodes were based on real cases ripped from the headlines (as *Law and Order* would have it (2003, 61-62). This genre was followed in the 1960s by programs such as *Candid Camera* and a series of programs that captured “ordinary people in ordinary settings” (2003, 63). Finally, Baker argues, programming such as *Survivor* situates real people in extraordinary settings and offers ordinary people a chance at stardom (2003, 64-65). Bradley Clissold has also argued that *Candid Camera* can be seen as a precedent to today’s rash of reality programming. Clissold explores the popularity of *Candid Camera* within the context of the Cold War, arguing that Funt’s use of concealed cameras to capture comic moments eased tensions regarding fears surrounding the idea of government surveillance and intrusion. Clissold suggests that today reality TV may be working to address these same fears in an era when the idea of privacy seems threatened (2004, 33-53). For Jennifer Gillan, precedents for reality programs such as MTV’s *The Osbournes* can be located in the star sitcoms of the 1950s, which situated stars within a domestic scenario. Thus, she argues, the format is not as new as it seems and can be situated within a history that includes *I Love Lucy* and *Ozzie and Harriet* (2004, 54-70).

A second body of work has focused on genres concerned with law enforcement, such as *Cops* and *America’s Most Wanted*. Deborah Jermyn argues that much of our current fascination

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3 The origin of *Candid Camera* was in radio, where it first made an appearance as *Candid Microphone* in 1947. In 1948 it debuted on ABC and moved to NBC in 1949, going into syndication in 1951. It later appeared as a segment on *The Tonight Show* and *The Garry Moore Show* before reappearing on CBS in 1960.
with what is real can be traced to real-crimes programming which started in Great Britain in the 1980s. Jermyn suggests that changes in technology enabled privileged access to “the real,” through, for example, home videos, feeding audience desire and pleasure in the spectacle of watching actuality (2004, 71-90). Other work has been concerned with the construction of race in such programming (Cavender, 2004; Derosia 2002; Glynn 2000). Kevin Glynn’s *Tabloid Culture* focuses on law enforcement reality programming, talk shows such as *Jerry Springer*, and tabloid-like news programming. For Glynn, while such programming can be seen on some levels as reactionary, it can also be seen as progressive, as it opens up a space to speak for those groups who tend to remain unheard. Further, Glynn argues that tabloid television acts as “a circulator of popular-cultural capital as it works to align its audiences with the skepticism and suspicion that popular knowledge directs against the controlling strategies” of the dominant group (2000, 169). Thus, Glynn opposes popular-culture capital to cultural capital, arguing that such capital “is made up of tastes and competencies produced outside of, and often against, official cultural institutions” (2000, 144).

Jon Dovey’s *Freakshow* was published in 2000, just prior to the current explosion of reality shows. Dovey focuses on intimacy and confession in a broad range of reality programming, ranging from the British *Crimewatch* and *Cops* (USA) to *Jerry Springer* and *Oprah*. Dovey takes political economy as his starting point, arguing, however, that political economy cannot address the entire issue of the popularity of intimacy and confession as entertainment (2000, 14). Dovey argues that there has been a shift in the public and private spheres such that all that was private has become public. With the displacement of grand narratives by neo-liberalism, we are left with the “foregrounding of individual subjective
experience” as a sign of authenticity (2000, 21). Dovey suggests that in an era of fragmentation and “‘cyborg’ identities” the “performance of intimacy” acts as part of the “production of normative identities,” both in the sense of moral hegemony, and “more crucially the whole idea of a coherent subject” (2000, 26). Dovey contends that reality television speaks to a new form of citizenship within neo-liberalism that appeals to the idea of personal empowerment which is then equated the “right to security,” the “right to consume,” and the “right to speak,” (2000, 88) lifting problems from the realm of the social to the world of self and family (2000, 120-121). In reality programming there is an emphasis on individual responsibility and self help rather than social responsibility; issues of security can be addressed by reporting on our neighbors; personal crises can be addressed in therapeutic “quick fix solutions” as they become a matter of “individualized consumer life-style choices” (2000, 164).

Su Holmes and Deborah Jermyn, in their “Introduction” to *Understanding Reality TV* (2004) take the position of political economy and the Frankfurt School to task, despite prominent reference to Dovey. Holmes and Jermyn make a point of referencing Dovey’s position that political economy cannot completely explain the popularity of reality TV while ignoring the fact that it is Dovey’s “starting point” (stated by Dovey 2000, 14). For Holmes and Jermyn, “a key suspicion surrounding such discourses is their profoundly ideological foundations” or what they see as the elitism of any judgements of value in relation to discourses of the popular – for, they argue, any such discussions should themselves “be the focus of analysis” (2004, 9-10). Such a conclusion points to the somewhat dubious position discussed earlier, i.e., a fear that judgements of value by academics should always be suspect, while judgements of value by subordinate groups should not be questioned.
Holmes and Jermyn also use the introduction to take swipes at the Frankfurt School, arguing that concerns over value are tied to “assumptions about the audience” and are “characterized by a paternalistic and conservative impulse that, within the mass-society tradition, constructs the audience as vulnerable and malleable,” reducing Frankfurt School critical theory to the simplistic idea of audience as dupes (2004, 10). As opposed to such positions, they suggest that we are at “a crucial point in developing a more sympathetic and indeed sophisticated approach” to the study of reality TV, an approach we will presumably find in their collection (2004, 17). Indeed, it is true that the collection is sympathetic, for, as they point out, the first essay critical of the reality TV format is chapter seven, half-way through the book.

Two essays in the collection are of particular relevance to my concerns: an essay addressing the active audience and an essay addressing lifestyle programming. Estella Tinknell and Parvati Raghuram’s piece on Big Brother and the active audience does suggest that Big Brother opened up new possibilities for the audience in terms of interaction allowing for different and “contesting meanings” about the text and through which, for example, chatroom discussions could challenge, subvert and destabilize the “‘preferred’ meanings being offered by the studiedly neutral voiceover commentary” on the program itself (2004, 263). For Tinknell and Raghuram reality programming does to a large extent, represent the democratization of television, in which the audience becomes the author of the program, only somewhat constrained by the process of editing. Yet, they argue that, despite audience empowerment, we must be careful in seeing the active audience as a resistant one or in assuming that an active audience necessarily transforms relations of power. While granting more credence to concepts of the active audience than I am wont to do, Tinknell and Raghuram do recognize that audiences do act
within constraints and that active audiences do not equal resistant audiences (2004, 252-269). However, there is virtually no mention of how an active audience may actually serve the needs of flexible capitalism or of the significance of contested readings in chatrooms in relation to the broader social structure. Exactly what might be subverted or destabilized here?

Gareth Palmer’s essay from the same collection focuses on lifestyle programming in Britain. Palmer argues that class is present, but disguised, in lifestyle programming. Palmer is also concerned with the use of surveillance and the way such programming uses (or abuses) surveillance footage to allow participants to see themselves as others do, thus rationalizing the necessity for transformation while normalizing surveillance in everyday life. Palmer draws attention to connections between lifestyle programming in which all transformation takes place at the level of the self and the personal development movement in which the self is seen as a project; life is but “a series of challenges which the empowered person overcomes, then there is no need to pay attention to anything else” (2004, 187).

For the purposes of this study, Andrejevic’s Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched, is one of the most relevant recent works. Andrejevic’s book is not about reality television per se; rather he uses reality TV as metaphor for an analysis of interactive media and its promise of democratization within flexible capitalism. Drawing heavily from Marx and Adorno, Andrejevic’s basic argument concerns the normalization and acceptance of surveillance. Programs such as Big Brother normalize surveillance and the turning of what was private space into public space. Interactive media “operate as a form of digital enclosure” for “market-based monitoring,” (2004, 18) enabling what Andrejevic calls “mass customization” (2004, 19). For Andrejevic, reality programming promotes surveillance “as a form of self-empowerment” and
repositions “surveillance as the guarantor of individualism and self-expression” (2004, 18) in which consumers are encouraged “to regard their self-commodification as a form of ‘self-expression’” (2004, 53). As Andrejevic argues, the promise of democratization through active participation is little more than illusion; participation is an exchange value which is traded for information regarding our tastes in viewing, products, and lifestyle (2004, 44).

One of the most successful programs in the US, Survivor, has also drawn critical attention. The collection edited by Matthew J. Smith and Andrew F. Wood, Survivor Lessons (2003), is dedicated solely to the analysis of Survivor. Drawing on the work of scholars from various disciplines and perspectives, the editors view the collection as a conversation. The fact that the work draws from a variety of disciplines is reflected in the essays. Ed Wingenbach’s essay, for example, uses Survivor to argue for what he sees as the weakness of social choice theory, a theory that argues that collective action is basically rational, and is determined by perceived benefits and costs to the individual. Wingenbach argues that Survivor disproves this theory, demonstrating “the priority of non-rational factors in human decision making” (2003, 146). For example, Wingenbach found that moral beliefs assumed priority over “rational self-interest” and that players who chose to act against their own interests were often well aware of the correct strategies (for winning), choosing instead to act in a way they found in keeping with their own sense of ethics (2003, 146-147).

Jennifer Thackaberry argues that during the first season the network promoted Survivor as a metaphor for office politics – a metaphor that gave the show a sense of familiarity and a way of understanding the program. However, Thackaberry points out that if the metaphor of the workplace initially found familiar territory in the “themes of cooperation versus competition,
[and] disparities in workplace rewards,” (2003, 174) the show inadvertently led to deeper discussions about the unfairness and fears found in the workplace itself. She suggests that Survivor might be seen as a site for exploring such workplace issues as individual greed and workplace relationships. Ultimately, she argues that the metaphor lost its cache as viewers became familiar with the show, and the office metaphor drew attention away from the game (2003, 153-181). There is a marked absence of Marxist or Frankfurt School theory in this collection, an absence brought home by Thackaberry’s analysis, which fails to provide any reference to how such office politics might be related to the competitiveness of global capitalism. By failing to extend the metaphor, Thackaberry misses the opportunity to examine how the neo-tribalism of Survivor is enlisted to naturalize contemporary capitalism, or to question whether or not such naturalization works. Other essays in this collection include work on the construction of identity through the desire for the primitive other (Steven S. Vrooman) and R. Thomas Boone’s discussion of trustworthiness and the reading of cues via demeanor. Unfortunately, none of the essays address economic issues such as production costs or ask how Survivor impacts local economies and ecologies long term.

Two of the essays in the collection Reality TV, edited by Murray and Ouellette also consider Survivor. One essay argues that the narrative pleasure of Survivor is derived from the uncertainty of knowing the outcome, the “genuine unscripted chance.” The unpredictability contributes to suspense and the pleasure of imagining various scenarios (Mary Beth Harolvich and Michael W. Trosset 2004, 75). Kathleen LeBesco’s essay is concerned with reality TV’s influence on changing perceptions of “transgressive sexuality,” that is, of gayness. She argues, for example, that the “subversive representational power” of out gay male Richard Hatch was
diluted by the lack of attention paid to his sexuality. However, her study of fan message boards indicated that fans quickly attacked any homophobic comments. She concludes that programs such as *Survivor*, even as they present conservative and stereotypical images of transgressive sexualities, are open to “contrary readings that value sexual diversity” (2004, 271, 286).

Two essays in this collection address the economics of reality television. Chad Raphael’s essay discusses how reality TV, such as real cop shows, emerged in the 1980s in response to growing production costs and the increasingly fragmented markets made possible by cable TV. Reality programs surged in a period of unrest in which networks and producers were cutting costs by eliminating staff and attempting to bypass union labor, a move which spurred strikes by several guilds. Reality TV cut production costs sharply allowing producers to recoup their costs from licensing fees. These programs also profited from syndication both in the US and internationally. *Rescue 911* was available in Germany, Denmark, and Sweden by 1991 (2004-136).

Ted Magder’s essay examines the new business model introduced with the more recent crop of reality programming. Programs such as *ER*, which cost NBC about $13 million per episode, and *Friends*, which cost $5.5 million were based on a business model in which NBC did not own the shows, but licensed the rights to air them from the producer, Warner Brothers Television. They recoup their costs through advertising. Licensing fees will go up when successful programs are renewed. When Mark Burnett approached CBS about *Survivor* they agreed to air the program, but only if they changed the structure of the business model. Rather

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4 As I note in chapter five, gay men figure prominently in life style programming. Their represent an upscale market and are often featured as the clientele on programs such as *Landscaper’s Challenge*. They also feature prominently as the experts to which the unlearned turn for fashion advice and help in remodeling.
than pay a licensing fee, Burnett was required to lineup sponsors ahead of time and share advertising revenue with CBS. Thus, sponsors, not CBS, were paying for the show’s production. Changes have also occurred on the production side in the way programs are distributed globally. Rather than selling an actual program, producers such as Endemol sell formats, basically a set of rules or guidelines for producing and marketing the products (2004, 137-156). As I discuss in later chapters, the sale of formats is instrumental to the process of what I call glocalization; it allows a successful idea (reducing risk) to be marketed globally and tailored to a specific locality.\footnote{The term “glocalization” first appeared in articles published in the \textit{Harvard Business Review} in the 1980s. First used by Japanese economists to refer to Japanese business practices, the term was subsequently used by Dr. Manfred Lange, director of the Global Change exhibition, to refer to the interplay between the local and the global. The term has since been popularized and is in common usage.} For example, the concept for \textit{Survivor}, first conceived as \textit{Survive!}, was developed by Charlie Parsons, a British producer. Parsons worked in conjunction with a British based production company, Planet 24, to bring his project to fruition. After trying to market the concept in the US and the United Kingdom, the format was first sold to Strix, a Swedish company that bought the Nordic rights to the format. \textit{Survive!} first aired on Swedish television as \textit{Expedition Robinson} in 1997. Mark Burnett, the US producer of \textit{Survivor}, bought the US rights in 1998 and its success in Sweden prompted CBS to pick up the format, which first aired as \textit{Survivor} in the US in May of 2000. The phenomenal success of the format in the US is often seen as ushering in the age of reality TV. In addition to the revenue earned through syndication of the US program, the format has been purchased by countries as diverse as Hungary, Pakistan, Greece, Columbia, Spain, Bulgaria, and Russia.

Reality TV has also benefitted from product placement, the practice of displaying display a brand’s logo within the context of the program, and interactivity as is shown in my discussion

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of programs such as *Big Brother* and *American Idol*. The increase in revenue generated has led other genres to increasingly look at product placement and interactivity as sources of revenue (Madger 2004, 137-156). As discussed in chapter four *American Idol* benefits from its core sponsors and is the leader in product placement; it also benefits from audience voting, receiving a share of the revenue from text messaging, and it is seen by the industry as introducing text messaging to Americans. Additionally, programs which require viewers to vote during the televised segment dilute the effectiveness of technologies such as TiVo, which allows viewers to watch programs at their leisure and skip over commercials.

As production costs of reality programming have risen, especially with the exotic programs such as *Survivor*, reducing the gap between scripted and “non-scripted” programming, networks and producers are turning to game-show formats that are less expensive to produce and have family-friendly appeal. At the other end of the scale, luxury products and upscale advertisers looking for programming that appeals to an audience on the upper end will find programming developed to push luxury goods in ABC’s 2007 fall line-up of dramatic series about wealth and big business. According to Steve McPherson, president of ABC Entertainment, ABC is also experimenting with new business models for programming: advertiser financed pilots. The network and advertiser co-finance the pilot and production. In exchange, the advertiser gets inventory (ad time) in the show. After the pilot, the network has the option to either license the program in a regular manner, buy back and move the production to their own studio, or continue in the relationship (CNBC 2007). These new business models reflect the need for attention to the processes of production in our claims regarding consumer culture and especially consumer democracies and choice.
As networks continue to battle rising costs they increasingly look for new ways to reap revenue. After all, it is the advertisers who are the networks customers not the viewers. Networks must negotiate a space between the needs of advertisers and viewers, especially those viewers most likely to spend. In our analyses of reality TV we need to recognize that many of the aspects scholars claim are democratizing are designed to increase profit; a recognition of the market-driven nature of programming and its ideology is essential to our understanding of reality television as well as other commodities. Indeed, the failure to analyze reality TV within the broader context of global capitalism would seem to be a major weakness in much of the work on reality TV.  

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6 This is not to assert that all work on reality TV ignores economic determinates. Both Andrejevic (2004) and Dovey (2000) frame their arguments in relation to the conditions of global capitalism.
CHAPTER THREE

TRANSGRESSION: NORM = BAD, TRANSGRESSION = GOOD 
OR GOTTA BE BAD TO BE GOOD

In fact, the political program of cultural studies is surprisingly content-poor, reducing in general to praise for transgression and well-meaning bromides about respect for “difference.”

– Schwarz 2000

The idea of transgressing, that is of sinning, or crossing a limit or boundary, of being “bad” so as to “subvert” the “norm,” would seem to hold a particular fascination for scholars in cultural studies as well as literary theory. This strain within cultural studies is reflective of the so-called “cultural or linguistic turn” as well as what Teresa Ebert has termed ludic theory. Ebert argues that ludic\(^1\) theory has displaced materialist analysis and broad-based struggle, emphasizing instead discursive play and the play of desire in which change takes place in those gaps or openings for transgressions (1996).

David Harris has suggested that cultural studies has engaged in a symptomatic reading of Gramsci that ignores the ways in which hegemony is enforced, focusing instead on counter-hegemony (1992). I would argue that cultural studies has also engaged in a symptomatic and partial reading of theories of transgression. Always on the lookout for subversion, cultural studies finds transgression everywhere. For John Fiske, transgression can be found in playing a video game at the arcade; video games invert norms in that they are non-productive (wasteful); the bodily pleasure found in playing video games inverts the ideology of morality that seeks to condemn and control pleasure thus becoming a means of resistance (1989, 77-90). Ignored in the

\(^1\) Ludic, from ludere meaning to play. Ebert’s use is directed especially at poststructuralism.
celebratory tones greeting these found instances of transgression is all that is problematic with transgression itself. My focus in this chapter is bringing to light that which I find problematic in locating transgression as progressive or as a primary (or the only) impetus of social change. First, I argue that the claims for subversion are exaggerated; transgression relies on the very limit or law which it transgresses, that which cultural studies would have it undermine or undo. Without the limit it ceases to have meaning. In this sense, rather than subvert, transgression upholds the limit. Any inversion or perversion is temporary. Second, transgression involves a violence against an other. Thus, while the transgression may create a sense of temporal euphoria or even empowerment for the transgressor(s), as in the case of carnival for Bakhtin, it is most often at the expense of some one or group positioned lower within the social hierarchy such as women or Jews, as discussed by Peter Stallybrass and Allon White. Lastly, transgression must be viewed as a form of capital. If viewed as a form of symbolic capital, transgression is what makes one cool, trendy, apart from the norm, an outlaw or outsider, an individual. As such, the profits to be made in the selling of transgression have not been lost in the marketplace of late capitalism where the selling of difference, individualism, rebellion, and the always new is an everyday affair.

The first part of this chapter provides an overview of the theories of transgression from which much of the work in cultural studies has drawn. My point in this overview is to suggest that this work was not as celebratory of transgression and subversion as some cultural studies scholars have tended to be. It is only through a partial reading of this theoretical work that the strong claims of subversion and resistance can be made; for these claims rely on ignoring critiques of the containment of transgression and recuperation of the law that is made evident in
the work of figures such as Foucault and Bakhtin. I then discuss the role concepts of transgression have played within cultural studies, focusing on criticisms leveled against the way theories of transgression have been used; the romantic views of transgressive resistance in popular practices and the limitations of transgression as praxis. In the last part of the chapter I discuss reality television and its apparent transgressions, that is, how it is seen as breaching the limits of genre and the TV screen, as well as pushing limits in its encouragement of the encroachment of taboos. Again, my point here is less a full analysis of reality TV, than a way of getting at the arguments regarding transgression. The implications of particular accounts of transgression can be tested against reality programming; reality programming demonstrates the commercialization of transgression and its recuperation.

Transgression as a Flash, Violence and Loss: Bataille and Foucault

In the work of both Bataille and Foucault, it is evident that transgression is never seen as undoing or subverting the limit or the law; rather, it depends upon the law to have meaning. Transgression is always temporal; a momentary elation based on the violation of a boundary, a norm or rule. For both, the normative, the law, is seen as oppressive, an imposition on the individual’s will and capacity for self-expression. The needs and values of society are seen as inherently opposed to those of the individual. However, reduced to such particularity, it would also seem that any expression of will would create an inequality or a violence in a sense, and the need for endless transgression by each individual. The violence that inheres in the concept of transgression is easily located in de Sade, who saw no value in others and felt that the strong man will but use others to satisfy his own desires. While it is argued that transgression is a place
of excess and the irrational, and thus outside an economy of use value, I would argue that transgression is not non-utilitarian. Transgression has long held cache, a form of symbolic capital in which the Romantics, the Expressivists, Dadaists, and others valorized deviance and rebellion. From de Sade to Billy the Kid, the figure of the outlaw or rebel has been a romantic one. Furthermore, transgression is a market value. Contemporary consumer capitalism relies on excess, on our desire for the always new and plenty of it. We do not buy only what we need; we buy to play, to construct an identity, we buy in excess.

That the work of de Sade has had important consequences in later work on transgression is undeniable. As Bataille wrote:

De Sade knew nothing about the basic interrelation of taboo and transgression, opposite and complimentary concepts. But he took the first step . . . It is not so easy to pass from the knowledge of mankind’s curious beliefs and behavior, in the field of religion, now linked with our knowledge of taboo and transgression, to that of the strangeness of his sexual behavior . . . And if today the average man has a profound insight into what transgression means for him, de Sade was the one who made ready the path. (1969, 192-193)

De Sade’s transgressive subject, for Bataille, stood as a “veritable indictment of the social order” who was “unconstrained by limits, bonds, and ‘good taste’” (David B. Allison, Mark S. Roberts, & Allen S. Weiss, 1995, 7). Similarly, Foucault found that, “through the work of Sade and Goya, the Western world received the possibility of transcending its reason in violence, and of recovering tragic experience beyond the promises of dialectic” (1965, 285).

For Bataille, as for de Sade, transgression meant the transcendence of or the movement beyond the rational, “a refusal of ‘civilization’” (Michel Beaujour 1972, 149), the crossing to a place of excess, and non-utilitarian expenditure. Transgression requires knowledge of the limit or prohibition it violates, for it is the awareness of the breaking of taboo through which we find the
ecstacy, and the elation of transgression (Frow 1995; Jurgen Habermas 1984; Marchak 1990; Suleiman 1986; Surkis 1996). Transgression neither elides or subverts the law or limit; it makes us more conscious of and maintains the limit so that we may benefit from it; it is a benefit gleaned in the ecstatic experience and pleasure of violating the forbidden (Bataille 1969; Guerlac 1996; Catherine Marchak 1990; Suleiman 1986; Surkis 1996). As Bataille wrote, “At all costs we need to transcend [limits], but we should like to transcend them and maintain them simultaneously” (1986, 141). Transgression, for Bataille, was an individual, interior experience (Bataille 1969; Beaujour 1972; Guerlac 1996; Suleiman 1986); he saw eroticism as the purest form of transgression, as it subordinated rational and productive expenditure to vulgar excess and free play (Marchak 1990; Suleiman 1986; Surkis 1996). Thus, the erotic allowed the transgression of “the limits of individual existence by leaping or falling into the realm of continuity or limitless being in order to access the zone of death,” that is, either a literal death or the dissolution of subjectivity (Surkis 1996, 19). While literary or discursive transgression, for Bataille, served as a metaphor for erotic transgression, he nonetheless felt that such transgression was unable to reach the extreme limit, in that beyond the limits the possibility of language did not exist (Marchak 1990).

Bataille’s work exerted an extensive influence on major figures identified with poststructuralism, including Foucault. In his “Preface to Transgression” Foucault wrote, “The language in which transgression will find its space and the illumination of its being lies almost entirely in the future. It is surely possible, however, to find in Bataille its calcinated roots, its

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2 Following Bataille’s death in 1962, Sulieman points out that several leading figures, including Barthes, Kristeva, Derrida, and Foucault, wrote major essays dealing with his work (1986, 118). According to Marchak, Barthes’ concept of jouissance and Kristeva’s idea of the abject are closely related to the Bataillean notion of transgression (1990).
promising ashes” (1977, 33). According to Guerlac, it is Foucault who “established transgression as an alternative to the machine of dialectical contradiction,” reinscribing Bataille’s concept of “transgression within the intertextual field of philosophy” (1996, 6-7). Thus, she writes, “Transgression becomes identified with a ‘philosophy of eroticism’ . . . a gesture that transvalues philosophy from the realm of cognitive or rational experience to ‘an experience of finitude and of being, of the limit of transgression’” (1996, 6), a position Surkis argues has already been located by Bataille, who in his “theory of transgression aims to evoke a ‘world of play’ in which ‘philosophy disintegrates’” (1996, 18). Additionally, Surkis suggests that “in his attempt to lose himself (rupture his own philosophical and discursive limits) in Bataille, Foucault both appropriates and repositions Bataille’s theory of transgression, effacing the gendered dynamic that . . . structures Bataille’s concept, an exclusion upon which . . . Foucault’s own project of self-loss relies” (1996, 19). For both Guerlac and Surkis, Bataille’s theory of erotic transgression is gendered, enacting a relationship of female subordination to ensure masculine self-loss. Thus Surkis argues:

Bataille’s introductory discussion [in Eroticism] of the process by which individual discontinuity is ruptured . . . relies on an initial, gendered difference between erotic partners. . . . A fundamental division is enacted here between the “masculine” partner and the “feminine part”; the feminine is already lost as a subject . . . In order for the masculine side to lose himself, the passive, feminine side must be always already dissolved as a continuous being: her loss initiates his fall into continuity. In the meantime the masculine partner is only “relatively dissolved,” remaining “discontinuous” enough to derive meaning and sense from her imaged annihilation. The feminine dissolution is thus necessarily prior to the masculine, with his experience of continuity predicated on her prior and total self-loss. (1996, 20)

Surkis argues that in the work of Bataille, woman serves as a marker, or as evidence of transgression, because the masculine partner “has difficulty sensing transgression within
himself” (1996, 21). Never fully realizing a loss of self, the masculine partner remains on the borderline. Problematic in Foucault’s reading then, is the fact that he “obscures Bataille’s reliance on the image of the feminine other’s self-loss,” instead positioning Bataille in the object or feminine position, enabling him “to envision his own (future) transgression” (1996, 23, 25).

Thus, the possibility of Foucault’s own self-loss is predicated on his elision of the fact that “Bataille’s transgression . . . remains incomplete,” that is, that the writer, the narrator, the theorizer is never completely effaced (Surkis 1996, 25-29). For Surkis both the gendered dynamic found in Bataille’s account of transgression and Foucault’s evasion of this dynamic are problematic. She questions the supposedly radical nature of these “gestures of self-loss” and argues they deserve further questioning:

Does this desire for self-dissolution, which is founded on the “image” of another’s loss, in fact strengthen or reinscribe the position of the “masculine” witness rather than radically disable it? An examination of the gendered nature of transgression raises the problem of who is really lost? Who benefits from the enactment of self-loss? Who witnesses and theorizes about the simultaneous appearance of the limit and its transgression? (1996, 30)

For Foucault, as with Bataille, transgression is intimately linked to the law, and to limits and, as he argues, transgression does not subvert or undermine. In his “Preface to Transgression” Foucault writes that:

The limit and transgression depend on each other for whatever density of being

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3 He never moves beyond all reason, he is limited by the law of language. He can only be the observer of the annihilation of another, through which he is able to experience a degree of self-loss.

4 For an interesting discussion of a similar problem in the work of queer theorist John Champagne, see the “Foreword” by Donald E. Pease in Champagne’s The Ethics of Marginality. Pease argues that in Champagne’s use of the gay male s/m subculture as an example of what is “most transgressive in the gay movement” he ignores the ways in which these practices indirectly affirm violence against women. Pease is critical of Champagne’s refusal to interrogate the gendered dynamic of s/m and transgression and of subjectivity found in the work of Foucault and followed in his own work (Pease 1995, xiv-xv).
they possess: a limit could not exist if it were absolutely uncrossable and, reciprocally, transgression would be pointless if it merely crossed a limit composed of illusions and shadows. . . .
. . . it [transgression] must be liberated from the scandalous or subversive, that is, from anything aroused by negative associations. Transgression does not seek to oppose one thing to another, nor does it achieve its purpose through mockery or by upsetting the solidarity of foundations; it does not transform the other side of the mirror, beyond an invisible and uncrossable line, into a glittering expanse. Transgression is neither violence in a divided world (in an ethical world) nor a victory over limits (in a dialectical or revolutionary world) . . . Transgression contains nothing negative, but affirms limited being. (1977, 34-35)

Thus, as Michael Clifford has argued, for Foucault, “transgression is meaningless by itself; it presupposes that which is transgressed. . . . the limit in turn has no meaning without transgression. . . . A limit carries the possibility of its transgression constitutively” (1987, 226). Clifford also notes Foucault’s reference to transgression as “a kind of ‘lightening flash’ which traces the very line it effaces” and finds that, in Foucault:

Transgression in every case illuminates and in some sense creates the limit it transgresses. Transgression is wedded to the limit through annulment; it gives birth to the limit by abortion. Here the against-ness of transgression is more of an again-ness. The play of the limit and transgression is repeated again and again in an infinitesimal, even time-less, instant, an instant of no time, a lightening flash, a trace. (1987, 226)

In Foucault’s essay “Preface to Transgression,” he writes of “the experience of the philosopher who finds, not outside his language, . . . but at the inner core of its possibilities, the transgression of his philosophical being” (1977, 44). Guerlac argues that “Preface” “might be considered the opening move in what would become Tel Quel’s appropriation of Bataille,” for

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5 The French journal, Tel Quel was published in the late sixties and seventies with Philippe Sollers acting as chief spokesperson. As Suleiman points out, “Tel Quel considered itself a collective with a double revolutionary program” whose name “had been synonymous with the radically new — new conceptions of writing, of language, of subjectivity, of history, promising to revolutionize the ‘human sciences,’ including philosophy and the study of literature . . . [and] had represented, for many people, the latest incarnation of the European avant-garde” (1990, VIII).
it is here that Foucault suggests that transgression displaces dialectical contradiction by moving philosophy into the limitless space of language (1996, 6). Guerlac contends that Philippe Sollers took the concept of transgression a step further; following the lines of Foucault’s interpretation of Bataille, Sollers “adds an important element by interpreting interdiction as a discursive constraint upon language” and “transgression is thus reformulated as text” (1996, 7-8). As Suleiman argues, this move marked an important transition:

What theorists of textuality like Barthes, Derrida, and Sollers accomplished was to transfer, or perhaps more exactly to extend, Bataille’s notion of transgression to modern writing — that is, to écriture. For écriture, in the sense in which they used that term, is precisely that element of discursive practice which exceeds the traditional limits of meaning, of unity, of representation; and just as for Bataille the experience of transgression was indissociable from a consciousness of the limits it violated, so the practice of écriture was indissociable from a consciousness of the discursive and logical ‘rules,’ the system of prohibitions and exclusions that made meaning, unity, and representation possible but that the play of écriture constantly subverted. (1986, 121).

According to Guerlac, in this transition in which “Sollers insists on an exclusively linguistic interpretation of interdiction, while at the same time retaining the broad philosophical . . . claims Foucault had made for eroticism” has “the net effect [of] . . . an inflation of the claims made for transgression in the textual or poetic register, claims that then inform poststructuralist theory of writing and text” (1996, 7) and the assumption that textual transgression will somehow result in social revolution; this itself is one of the foundation beliefs of the historical avant-grade. I would add that it has informed the claims made for transgression in a selected body of work in cultural studies.
Carnivalesque Transgression: Inversion and Violence

In the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, specifically in his *Rabalaïs and His World*, carnival was a site of transgression and subversion. Bakhtin argued that “while carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it” - during carnival there are no spectators only participants (1984, 7). The carnival was a place of laughter, profane speech, and the grotesque displays of the body, a site in which cultural codes were turned upside down, creating a sense of regeneration and rebirth.

For Bakhtin, carnival was seen as inverting the norms and laws of the dominant culture; “one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation [which he stresses] from the prevailing truth and established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchal rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal” (Bakhtin 1984, 10). During the time of the fair or carnival the people could experience life outside of the official order and ideology as the order was turned upside down. It was a time when the people could express themselves with cursing and profanities, speech forms that Bakhtin argued were “liberated from norms and hierarchies” and which brought the people together in a “special collectivity” (1968, 187-188). The carnival was also a site of earthly delights, dirt, and physicality. Bakhtin celebrates and emphasizes the dirt of carnival and the grotesque body, especially the lower body, farting and smells, which violate the cultural codes of cleanliness and the desire to transcend physicality. Much as Foucault saw erotic transgression being displaced by textual transgression, so Bakhtin argues that carnival and the grotesque were displaced and during the Romantic period “acquired a private ‘chamber’ character. It became, as it were, individual carnival, marked by a vivid sense of isolation. The carnival spirit was transposed into a subjective, idealistic philosophy. It ceased to be the concrete . . . experience of
the one, inexhaustible being, as it was in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance” (Bakhtin 1984, 37). Much of what he saw as subversive and liberating, such as cursing and profanity, had lost its power. Thus, he finds “modern indecent abuse and cursing” have only retained the negative aspects of the grotesque body; that is, the body no longer symbolizes death and regeneration, but now only “cynicism and insult” (Bakhtin 1984, 28) which “is by now clichéd and no longer creative” (Bakhtin 1981, 238).

Bakhtin’s work has had broad appeal within cultural studies; his work again appeals to the desire to locate agency on the part of the individual and to transgress and subvert all norms and heirarchies within the dominant culture. For Fiske, the pleasures of the popular, as is found in carnival, “contain[s] the potential for resistance or subversion,” a refusal of the dominant ideology, which even if “this subversive activity is semiotic or cultural rather than social or even military does not denude it of any effectivity” (1987, 241). However, despite his appeal, Bakhtin’s work has been criticized as being overly idealistic and optimistic in his view of carnival (Michael Bernstein 1986; Terry Eagleton 1981; Peter Stallybrass and Allon White 1986; Slovaj Zizek 1992).

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6 Bakhtin has exerted a major influence, for example, on the work of Fiske (1987) and John Docker (1994). He is frequently cited in work on the body, especially the female body. See for example, Mary Russo (1986) and several of the essays in the recent volume, Bodies out of Bounds (2001). A particularly interesting example from the collection is an essay by Joyce L. Huff, that seems to invoke both the Bakhtinian carnivalesque and New Age psychobabble. She argues that, “in the carnivalesque tradition corpulent bodies joyously refuse to assimilate to the norm and thus serve to challenge the tyranny of the average. . . [we] can look to such alternative traditions for potential ways to positively resignify corpulence, co-opting the discourse that defines him or her as other to the norm and refiguring deviance as a difference to be celebrated. In this . . . lies a possibility for resistance and self-affirmation” (54). It is hard to conceive of how these bodies are either “deviant” or “challenge the tyranny of the average” when as much as sixty-five percent of the US population is considered either overweight or obese with Europe, and even the “undeveloped” countries moving in this direction! Bakhtin’s work is also frequently used in the analysis of television and the carnivalesque. See for example, Joshua Gamson on talk television as a site of carnivalesque excess in his work, Freaks Talk Back (1999).

7 Fiske uses the work of Bakhtin in his argument regarding the transgressive and pleasurable nature of wrestling and Miami Vice.
The problem may not lie with Bakhtin, per se, but with the way his work has been appropriated and used in making claims regarding the subversive nature of carnival. Graeme Turner suggests that “Bakhtin’s theory of ‘the carnivalesque’ has been widely and often carelessly adapted to conceive popular culture as, intrinsically, a source of resistance - its denigrated pleasures not only offending but also subverting the control of its masters” (1992, 202). Slavoj Zizek makes a similar point, arguing that “as numerous analyses from Bakhtin onwards have shown, periodic transgressions are inherent to the social order; they function as a condition of the latter’s stability. (Bakhtin’s mistake - or rather, the mistake of some of his followers - was to present an idealized image of these ‘transgressions’ . . .)” (1992, 225). Tony Bennett has also been critical of the celebratory, uncritical use of carnival:

This is not to suggest that, in itself, the carnival tradition should be construed as progressive or that rituals of transgression should be counted as oppositional in their own right. Nor did Bakhtin ever advance such a view, although this is often how his work has been appropriated (1986a, 147).

Bennett argues that it was not carnival per se, but the fusion of two traditions, the medieval carnival and Renaissance humanism, which Bakhtin found valuable; the transformative and regenerative aspects. Thus, Bennett points out that, “There can be no question, then, of any uncritical celebration of carnival as if the practices which comprised it somehow spoke their own meaning, voicing the authentic spirit of the people independently of the prevailing social and cultural relationships in which they were inscribed” (1986a, 148). Bennett is again critical of the “sleuth-like searching for transgressive practices, arguing that, “in any case, the limitations of rummaging through the past for aspects of carnival whose mutated echoes can be made to be heard in the present day are surely obvious” (1986b, 14).

Much of the celebratory work on carnivalesque transgression also ignores the violence of
carnival (Bernstein 1986; Wayne Booth 1986; Jonathan Dollimore 1994; Stallybrass and White 1986). As Jonathan Dollimore says, “something which those who celebrate transgression often overlook [is that] even as it offers a challenge to authority, transgression ever runs the risk of re-enacting elsewhere the very exploitation which it is resisting immediately” (1994, 85). Michael Bernstein has expressed concern with what he identifies as the “carnivalization of values” from which the inversion of hierarchies is less a concern than “being denied any vantage point from which a value can still be affirmed” (1986, 100) and points to the issue of violence in carnival, the maimings and killings Bakhtin chooses not to respond to in Rabelais. Bernstein argues that, “Bakhtin’s love for Rabelais and for what he sees as the redemptive energy of the Saturnalia at times blinds him” to the violence of carnival; it is an essentially romantic view in which we can celebrate carnival uncritically only if we choose to ignore the violence and distance ourselves from its victims (1986, 117).

Wayne Booth argues that Bakhtin’s redemptive laughter is also problematic and often at the expense of women:

Bawdy, scatalogical laughter is for Bakhtin a great progressive force, the expression of an ideology that opposes the official and authoritarian languages that dominate our surfaces. . . Unfortunately, ‘we’ have all this while been ignoring a crucial question: Who are ‘we’ who laugh, who are those to whom the defense is being written, [Bakhtin’s defense of the treatment of women in Rabelais], who are those who are healed by this laughter?” (1986, 161, 163).

Booth argues that Bakhtin’s failure to address the treatment of women in Rabelais, is in fact, a “failure of imagination,” a conflict with his own reputed beliefs, after which we can never read him uncritically again ( 1986, 174). His questioning of who laughs, or who it is that benefits, is similar to the question posed by Surkis when she questions who it is that benefits from a loss of subjectivity. Both point to the way in which transgression is often celebrated at the expense of
those with the least social power.

In their work, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, Peter Stallybrass and Allon White explore “carnival as one instance of a generalized economy of transgression and of the recoding of high/low relations across the social structure” (1986, 19). In their work, transgression is used to refer to an “infraction of binary structures,” an inversion, and it is the concept of inversion that they find most useful in Bakhtin. They separate their use of the term from what they identify as a more complex use of the term in philosophy and art, such as is found in the work of Bataille and Foucault, which they see as a “movement into an absolutely negative space beyond the structure of significance” (1986, 18). While their work has been widely quoted, their criticisms of carnival and of Bakhtin are usually ignored. Stallybrass and White are careful to avoid conflating inversion with subversion and are extremely critical of any such conflation.

Stallybrass and White identify several problems in what they see as the overly optimistic and populist view of carnival found in Bakhtin. First, they identify a problem with being able to identify the “shifts between prescriptive and descriptive categories in his work,” a problem they find “most insistent . . . in those passages where he emphasizes the positivity of the grotesque bodily element” (1986, 9-10). Second, they find in his populism and celebration of the people and the inversion of hierarchies a failure to address the violence of carnival. They also find Bakhtin’s account of carnival one-sided. In positioning the carnival or fair as outside of time and place, in which there is only unconstrained carnival celebration, Bakhtin locates the fair as “purely a site of pleasure.” However, this separation “of the festive from the commercial” allowed Bakhtin to ignore the fair as a commercial event, “a means of connecting up local and
communal ‘markets’ to the world market” (1986, 30).8

In ignoring the commercial aspects of the fair, Bakhtin elides the fact that far from being outside of the official order and ideology, the fair was a licensed event which “played a crucial part in the formation and transformation of local socio-economic relations and the state” (Stallybrass and White 1986, 35). Hence, the fair was a site in which emerging “mercantile interests could stimulate new desires . . . [an] educative spectacle, a relay for the diffusion of the cosmopolitan values of the ‘centre’ . . . throughout the provinces . . . stimulat[ing] new tastes and fashions among the general populace”(1986, 38). Thus, Stallybrass and White point out that while Bakhtin focused on the uncleanliness and dirt of the fair and the body, the fair was also a place where soaps, perfumes, and cosmetics were sold, intimating not excess “but rather the subtle intimation of lack” which served to further the values of the bourgeois class (1986, 39).

In their own work on transgression, Stallybrass and White are most interested in inversion and exclusion and their function in maintaining social relations. They argue that, “the ‘carnivalesque’ mediates between a classical/classificatory body9 and its negations, its Others, what it excludes to create its identity as such” (1986, 26); that is, “the bourgeois subject continuously defined and re-defined itself through the exclusion of what it marked out as ‘low’ — as dirty, repulsive, noisy, contaminating. Yet that very act of exclusion was constitutive of its

8 Stallybrass and White also point to this separation in the perspectives of various academic disciplines re carnival; in cultural studies and folklore the fair is seen in terms of popular celebration and subversion, whereas in economic history the fair is seen as a locus of commodity exchange (1986, 30).

9 Stallybrass and White draw from Bakhtin in their use of the terms “classical” and “grotesque”, noting that “in Bakhtin the ‘classical body’ denotes the inherent form of the high official culture and suggests that the shape and plasticity of the human body is indissociable from the shape and plasticity of discursive material and social norm in a collectivity”. They note the difference between the classical statue — on a pedestal, with “no openings or orifices,” beautiful, and untouched by material concerns, the transcendent individual — and the grotesque body which designates the low — with an emphasis on the materiality of the body, its openings, and not set apart from the social (1986, 21-23).
identity. The low was internalized under the sign of negation and disgust” (1986, 191). Thus, they find that it is these “low domains, . . . expelled as ‘Other,’ return as the object of nostalgia, longing and fascination” (1986, 191), that is, the desire for what has been displaced. Carnival, spectacles, fairs, written and verbal compositions, and other popular entertainments allow for “voyeuristic glimpses of a promiscuous loss of status and decorum which the bourgeoisie had to deny as abhorrent in order to emerge as a distinct and ‘proper’ class” and it is this role in social stratification which Stallybrass and White map (1986, 183).

While arguing that carnivalesque transgression carries within it the potential for destabilizing social hierarchies, they warn against “the current tendency to essentialize carnival and politics” (1986, 15) and argue that transgression is neither intrinsically radical nor conservative. For, as Terry Eagleton has pointed out, “Carnival, after all, is a licensed affair in every sense, a permissible rupture of hegemony, a contained popular blow-off as disturbing and relatively ineffectual as a revolutionary work of art. As Shakespeare’s Olivia remarks, there is no slander in an allowed fool” (1981, 148). The politics of carnival are also problematic in that the temporal suspension of one hierarchy leaves others intact. As Stallybrass and White argue, during carnival, “‘low’ social groups turn their figurative and actual power, not against those in authority, but against those who are even lower” often abusing and demonizing women, Jews or other ethnic groups, and animals (1986, 53).

Lastly, they find that, “particularly in the writing of Foucault and Julia Kristeva, transgression, whereby bourgeois writing smashes the rigidities of its own identity by projecting itself into the forbidden territories of precisely those excluded in its own political formation, has come to seem a positive and desirable kind of romantic politics” (1986, 200). Thus, Stallybrass
and White argue that “the bourgeoisie . . . is perpetually rediscovering the carnivalesque as a radical source of transcendence” which is “constitutive of the very formation of middleclass identity.” They argue that to conflate the “infraction of formal literary codes of language” with a challenge to official law is problematic in that the law is seldom actually challenged, but rather the writing serves the needs of the upper classes. Any real challenge must take place at the “sites of discourse” (1986, 201).

For Slavoj Zizek, transgression is less a subversion than it is a “perversion as a socially ‘constructive’ attitude” in which “one is, so to speak, allowed to break the Law in the name of the Law itself.” Transgression does not challenge the social structure, rather, “the deepest identification which ‘holds a community together’ is not so much identification with the Law which regulates its ‘normal’ everyday circuit as, rather, identification with the specific form of transgression of the Law, of its suspension” (1992, 225). For example, Zizek argues that in the 1920s South whites experienced a “solidarity-in-guilt”; that is, in condoning participation in the Ku Klux Klan, white transgressors were recognized “as ‘one of us’,” as part of a community, while if the transgressor refused participation he was seen as “‘not one of us’,,” much as the Nazis “relied on the same “solidarity-in-guilt” adduced by the participation in a common transgression” (1992, 225-226). Carnival then, as an allowed suspension of the everyday, can be viewed as that which held the community together and kept existing hierarchies intact.

**Looking for Subversion in All the Wrong Places? Cultural Studies and the Celebration of Transgression**

According to Suzanne Guerlac “if there is a single term poststructuralism could not live
without . . . it is ‘transgression’ ” (1996, 6). Arguably, the same can be said to be true of cultural studies. As Jeffrey T. Nealon and Caren Irr posit “from its inception in England to its present configurations in North America” and elsewhere “Cultural Studies has predominantly focused its intellectual and political energies on unleashing subversive resistance and ‘agency,’ the subversive multiple potentialities of the individual in . . . everyday life . . . the insurgent agency of the consuming subject and the secretly transgressive qualities of cultural commodities” (2002, 2-3).

While Nealon and Irr contend that scholars have recently begun to retreat from the “‘transgression’ model” and “celebrations of subjective transgression” (2002, 4), cultural studies interest in transgression as subversion will not easily be dislodged. That transgression remains a popular topic remains evident in course titles, calls for papers, and publications. For example, the e-journal *Quest*, recently had a call for papers on cultural transgression for their Autumn 2006 issue is devoted to the topic. Terry Ceasar joked that at a recent conference for his discipline, English, over half the papers were on transgression (2006). And from Indiana to Taiwan, the academy continues to proffer enticing courses valorizing cultural transgression.10 Such courses are indicative of a continued romance with transgression offering to explore the way in which “modes of transgression [are] used to subvert the power of dominant institutions that shape our social identities and reproduce race, class, gender, and sexual inequality” (Joan Weston, 2001) or examining performance as “political gesture, suggesting transgression and rebellion” (Jeffrey

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10 These are but a few of the many offerings on transgression: “Melodrama: Tales of Identity & Transgression” (Fall 2005) and “Rhetorics of Transgression and Resistance” (Fall 2004), Cultural Studies at Indiana University, “Transgression and the Oriental Sublime” (Fall 2006) at the Institute of Social and Cultural Studies, National Chiao Tung University, Taiwan, “Culture, Society and Transgression” (2006), Queen Mary, University of London, and “Transgression and Taboo” (2002), University of Maryland. The University of Manchester offers an MA in “Cultures of Transgression.”
The term transgression, in fact, seems to have become a trendy, sexy catchword; everything, everywhere it seems is being transgressed and the often inane claims made in the name of transgression are seldom challenged. Whether it’s the vampire Spike transgressing gender boundaries by watching daytime soaps, or fat bodies transgressing the moral inscriptions on body size, transgression continues to be seen as subverting cultural norms. Madonna subverts gender through her expression of female desire and excess femininity (bell hooks 1993; Schwichtenberg 1993). For some, cultural studies itself is transgressive. According to Stanley Aronowitz, cultural studies is transgressive in that it is not interdisciplinary, but “anti-disciplinary.” For Aronowitz there is a “tendency of cultural studies toward intellectual transgression . . . British cultural studies was known for this violation [the study of working class culture], and then for the violation of the violation” in its move toward work focused on women, race, and youth and the agency located therein. In “opposition to a more classical Marxism, “cultural studies made an “effort to reconstitute legitimate knowledge and its agency” (1993, 8-9). Similarly, Henry Giroux argued that cultural studies must see all knowledge as a consequence of relations of power; its job then, is “to reshape knowledge according to a strategy of

11 From the course description of “Culture, Power, and Transgression”, taught by Joan Weston, fall 2001, Oberlin, and the course description for “Cultural Performance in the Social Sciences and Humanities”, taught by Jeffrey Alexander, spring 2005, Yale University.

12 In “Queering the Bitch: Spike, Transgression and Erotic Empowerment,” (2005) Dee Amy-Chinn claims the vampire from the television program “Buffy the Vampire Slayer” crosses gender boundaries by watching soap operas.

13 See Bodies out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression edited by Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco.
transgression” (1992, 202). Thus, it is hardly surprising that Alan Sokal’s parody of some of the intellectual stars of cultural studies, including Aronowitz and Andrew Ross, published in the cultural studies journal *Social Text* in 1996, was titled “Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity.”

That theories of transgression continue to occupy a privileged space within cultural studies should not be surprising in light of its political aspirations and desire to locate individual “agency,” a term which itself most often remains ill defined. First, if we read cultural studies founding impulse as in part a reaction to the work of the Frankfurt School, and later to Althusserian Marxism, both of which were seen as restricting agency, the interest in transgression and its promise of an active versus passive construction of the subject, the attraction to the possibilities suggested by transgression can be more readily understood. Moreover, as discussed in chapter one, the disillusionment with the failings of the political movements of the 1960s led to an aestheticized politics of the individual and opened the door for theorizing a politics of subjective transgression. Further, this was complemented by the linguistic turn and the influence of structuralism and postmodernism; if, as was being argued, meaning had been loosed from the sign and everything could be seen as a text or a collection of signs, then it followed that transgression through the crossing of a limit - or even through the use of a commodity - could destabilize meaning, revealing and unmasking power. Thus, theories of

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14 The claims of Aronowitz and Giroux point to a dilemma in cultural studies, that is, the privileging of marginalized voices as having an access to knowledge not available to the dominant group and an explanation of how, if knowledge is always seen as being part and parcel of the will to power, it might escape this in cultural studies.

15 Sokal’s parody focused on the misuse and abuse of scientific concepts and theories and left the journal red-faced.
transgression could be used to justify a positive evaluation of consumption. This type of work can be located in the early work on subcultures. In the work of Fiske there is hardly a popular activity that cannot be seen as transgressive, whether its shopping, surfing, or visiting the video arcade. For Fiske, “commodities are not just objects of economic exchange; they are goods to think with, goods to speak with” (1989, 31). Thus, somehow, the use of goods for our own, rather than official meanings, would undo or subvert cultural norms and thwart the system.

This transition is evidenced in the move from devaluing mass produced commodities to putting a positive spin on consumption. If, in the early years, the likes of Williams and Thompson initially focused on valuing common culture, that is, the culture of the working class, and the rejection of mass produced commodities, the focus soon shifted. A younger generation of scholars began to focus on how mass produced commodities could be used to carry new meanings. Much of the work on subcultures, such as the work of Dick Hebdige and Iain Chambers, is reflective of this direction in which commodities, if used by the “right” (deviant, outlaw, marginalized) subculture can carry meanings that resist or move outside of (transgress) the terms of the broader culture. This has led to a romanticized view of subcultural resistance which fails to question the direction of such resistance or how such resistance might actually translate into any real change or effectual politics.

Adam Schwartz has argued that some of the problems underlying this trend in cultural studies can be located within some of its underlying assumptions. First, cultural studies maintains “that all reality is socially constructed and that these constructions are *ipso facto* oppressive” (2005, 370). Second, under this scenario, “both ‘giving voice’ [refers to expressing and defining one’s own individual experience as truth, in cultural studies especially in relation to
marginalized voices] and the transgression of cultural norms or the ‘dominant ideology’ are seen as in themselves progressive or liberatory.” However, as he goes on to argue, “there is only one condition under which this can be so, and that is if the very notion of a norm, rule, an ideal, or constraint on total self-expression is seen as reactionary or oppressive,” that is, what is oppressive is “nothing less than culture itself” (2005, 371). This has led to “champion[ing] every subculture whose beliefs run counter to those of the majority or whose activities flout widely-shared norms as though that very fact alone were enough to make them oppressive” (2000, np).

As Schwartz argues, rather than a politicized study of culture, this move has led to a generalized aestheticism and expressivist politics (which I will return to in chapter five) conceived of in individualized terms:

The generalized call to transgression of social norms; the sacrilization of mundane and everyday cultural artifacts by a hyperarticulate and often arcane theoretical discourse; the formation of cadres on the basis of elective affinities; the radical posturing and apocalyptic, vanguardist rhetoric; above all the almost total absence of genuinely political aims and the almost complete political ineffectuality of the endeavor are all traits [shared with expressivism and romanticism]. (2005, 373-374)

But such an expressivist politics of transgression is problematic; it might leave me “free to be me,” but it is a freedom without justice. If, as Fiske claims, echoing Foucault, “the social norms, or that which is socially acceptable, are of course neither neutral nor objective: they have developed in the interests of those with social power, and they work to maintain their sites of power” (1987, 257), then we seem to be left with a very thin concept of culture; the social becomes little more than competing claims and voices. We would seem to be left with a politics of endless transgression in which resistance and transgression are supported per se and there is no vision of a future. Richard Wolin has pointed out that Georges Bataille late in his life realized the dangers of an aestheticized politics of violence and transgression and points to the perils of a
conception of just such a negative or anarchic freedom (1992, 13). As Wolin argues it is important that we “distinguish freedom from mere willfulness or arbitrariness” for a “‘boundless interplay without direction,’ . . . would be devoid of those elements of continuity, solidarity, and substance that first make freedom . . . meaningful. . . everything depends on our capacity to distinguish freedom from anomie or gratuitous social deviance” (1992, 15). I can easily visualize a society of unfettered self-expression that feeds the needs of flexible capitalism, and in which there is tolerance for “difference” but no empathy, and where the income gap between the rich and poor continues to grow; all freedom, no justice.

In much of the work on transgression it is often less than clear what is being subverted or exactly what the “dominant” is or why the dominant whatever needs to be subverted. It is only assumed that subversion is good. Thus, Timothy Burke argues that cultural studies ends up caught in its “own version of the devil and the deep blue sea” in which:

[T]he celebration of transgression and subversion, or alternatively, the relentless characterization of particular texts or popular practices [is seen] as playing a central role in domination. Texts transgress. Particular representations or images dominate. Performers subvert, and audiences do, too. But against what? Or dominate what? Sometimes nothing particularly discernable. Sometimes against or for the usual suspects . . . Often we are reduced to a game of spot-the-hegemon. And sometimes the transgression or domination is purely figurative, a rupture in or confirmation of a master discourse (master of what, we are often not told) which only disrupts or confirms as long as the scholar takes note of said transgression or domination. (1999, np)

Cultural studies would seem to end up caught in a trap of its own making. On the one hand, the dominant culture must be portrayed as in some sense totalitarian or resistance and transgression cease to make sense. On the other hand, it is portrayed as ceaselessly protean, in which case there seems to be little need to celebrate transgression!

For other critics of the “transgression model,” the heart of the problem lies in the
influence of postmodernism on cultural studies and what they see as the subsequent vacating of a politics. Daphne Pattai and Will H. Corral have argued that the current drifting in theory is related to:

[T]he spread of postmodernism’s aggressive vocabulary of subversion, demystification, transgression, fissures, decentered subjects, fragmentation, dimantled master narratives, and so on. This lexicon may promote an illusion of revolutionary upheaval (although in the name of what is unclear). But it is hard to see how such militant rhetoric contributes to an understanding, much less to the solution, of the real political struggles going on in the world. (2005, 12)

Jose G. Merquior argues that the calls for transgressive subversion within the academy have, in fact, become routine, ignoring the fact that transgression is but a simple inversion of the rule:

In order quietly to vindicate some sense of choice and individuality, we have embarked on an absurdist lusting after fantasy and rule breaking. Our myths of transgression help us to bear the anonymous rule of language. . . . But it goes without saying that theoretical clowning, for all its unruliness, turns into the rule. After all, it is just a mirror-image of logocracy . . . For this spate of ‘theory’ . . . may go on voicing its rhetoric of dissent and deviancy as loud as it pleases; the plain fact is that this noisy talk of transgression has become enormously ritualized. (2005, 241)

This “lusting after fantasy” and the failure to address real life struggles and inequities is noted by Tony Bennett who finds that “the road which beckons toward the phantom agents of much cultural theory is littered with missed political opportunity” (1992, 32). Years earlier, in the well-known anthology, Cultural Studies, edited by Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler, he expressed his hope for a less sexy, less “intoxicating” cultural studies after “a few more years of heady skirmishing with postmodernism before it goes out of style or a little more sleuth-like searching for subversive practices just where you’d least expect to find them” that acts as a corrective against “those forms of banality which, in some quarters, have already claimed it [cultural studies] while also resisting the lure of those debates whose contrived appearance of ineffable complexity makes them a death trap for practical thinking” (1992, 32-33).
Much of this work can be viewed as a consequence of the success of cultural studies within the academy and the desire for academics, who occupy a quintessential insider position, to view themselves as outsiders and radical subverters of “the system.” In light of this, as Greg Philo and David Miller put it, “academics have become culture industry groupies dedicated to excavating the most recent trends in music, fashion or popular culture and mistaking it for ‘resistance’ or viewing the transgression of boundaries as progressive political practice - cultural studies as a rationale for hanging out with what is cool” (2001, 32). This delving after transgressive instances has often led to some strange bedfellows. Take, for example, the claim by Laura Kipnis, that “Hustler’s insistent and repetitious return to the iconography of the body out of control, rampantly transgressing bourgeois norms and sullying bourgeois property and proprieties” is counter-hegemonic (1992, 376). Seldom, however, do such claims involve any discussion of the ways in which such transgression may be at someone’s expense; nor do they examine those instances of transgression for which they cannot make some progressive claim.

This direction within cultural studies has also tended to ignore how critics’ own claims for the transgressive possibilities of consumption coincide with the ideology of flexible capitalism. In distancing themselves from political economy, critics argue that cultural studies has inverted an earlier pessimism; focusing on consumption as an active, creative, even transgressive practice, the process of production and the unequal access to commodities has been relegated to the background (Clarke 1991; Frank 1997a; 2000; Mardock 1997). While

16 Oddly, Kipnis recognizes that Hustler may engage in racism, although she dismisses any complaint about the way women are portrayed as indicative of a radical feminist rampage re the free expression of sexuality. Cultural studies critics as a whole have tended to ignore those transgressions that they cannot somehow claim subvert in the particular (ill-defined) direction they want subversion to go. For example, there is no rush to celebrate the transgressive nature of the Klan, militia groups, or other “right” subcultures or youth movements.
contemporary scholars readily recognize that the market co-opts symbols of rebellion and resistance, they nonetheless argue that consumers use commodities in transgressive ways, giving new and divergent meanings in opposition to the supposed oppressive intent of the manufacturers of cultural products. But this begs the question of whether or not the market cares about these attached meanings so long as there is profit, what difference these new meanings make in the greater scheme of things, and how such self expression on the part of the affluent consumer affects others. There is a failure here to recognize how the interests of the corporate world and global capitalism and the celebratory claims of consumer choice within cultural studies would seem to dovetail. As Thomas Frank writes, corporations are not the oppressor but “a sponsor of fun, provider of life-style accouterments, facilitator of carnival”:

The countercultural idea has become capitalist orthodoxy, its hunger for transgression upon transgression now perfectly suited to an economic cultural regime that runs on ever-faster cyclings of the new (1997a, 34).

In fact, we can invest in transgression! Consider the variety of so-called niche mutual funds and vice or sin funds. Not only do corporations profit from the selling of transgression - we can too.

Donatien De Sade, whom Susan R. Sulieman calls the “founding father” of the French tradition of “transgressive writing” would most certainly roll in his grave were he to see all the claims currently made in the name of transgression (1986, 119). For, as Daniel Bell remarked back in 1978, transgression has become routine; “the paradox is that ‘heterodoxy’ has become conformist,” exercising “conformity under an antinomian flag” (xxvii).

As a politics, it would seem, transgression should be viewed as extremely ineffectual, for as Frow claims, “the peculiar ambiguity of the problematic of transgression, however, lies in its total dependence upon the law that is to be transgressed;” that is, we can only transgress against
what we believe in and our transgression serves as a confirmation of their authority (1995, 54). Moreover, transgression is always temporal and often at someone’s expense. While “cult studs” are busily unearthing transgression, resistance, and subversion in every bit of cultural debris, they have ignored those aspects of theories of transgression that limit and make questionable the idea of transgression as a viable and progressive politics. Rather, they have focused on those aspects that would seem to offer agency, much in the way Gramsci’s work has been appropriated with a focus on counter-hegemony or perhaps anti-hegemony. This focus, in turn, has tended to limit the questions asked, particularly failing to note how at the very moment when we seem to be moving toward what might be called a cultural libertarianism, we continue to move, on an almost a global scale, toward economic and political conservatism, and the global consolidation of capital.

**The Marketing of Transgression**

The commodification of transgression is nothing new. As William Leach puts it, contemporary corporate ideology in which the individual is viewed as governed by desire, “their quest after the new, their willingness to violate boundaries, their hatred of the old and habitual . . . and their need to incorporate ‘more and more’” bolstering corporate growth and consumption is part of a legacy inherited from pre-1930 corporate ideology (1993, 385). 17 Thus, Thomas Frank has argued that “consumer capitalism did not demand conformity or homogeneity; rather it

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17 Leach points to the influential work of Paul Mazur, who, in his 1927 book *American Prosperity*, argued that capitalism was liberating in its rejection of tradition and the desire for change. Seeing that America had moved from a “needs” to a “desires” culture, Mazur saw no limits to corporate expansion and “consumption possibilities” (in Leach, 1993, 290-291).
thrive on the doctrine of liberation and continual transgression” (1997a, 20). Frank argues that corporate ideology today “counsels not rigid adherence to the tastes of the herd but vigilant and constantly updated individualism. We consume not to fit in, but to prove, on the surface at least, that we are ... rebels” (1997a, 34). From cars to computers, advertisers appeal to the need to be seen as unique individuals. A Dell computer campaign exemplifies this appeal to individuality, claiming that, “At Dell we don’t build technology for everyone, we build it for only one - you. Every Dell solution is purely you.” While the Dell ad can be seen as referencing its sales model in which consumers select from a set group of options and their computer is shipped from the factory, it disguises the fact that consumers select from a limited array of components, that Dell suggests component combinations which most consumers are likely to follow, and that the “only you” computer is likely to be sold to thousands of other only you’s. Nonetheless, the Dell ad points to important changes in contemporary capitalism.

According to Frederic Jameson, what he refers to as “late capitalism” is marked by the rapid churn of consumer goods and a desire for the new, or what Frank refers to as the transgressive. Jameson argues that “what has happened is that aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally: the frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel-seeming goods . . . at ever greater rates of turnover, now assigns an increasingly essential structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation (1991, 4-5).

David Harvey has also identified a shift toward what he calls “flexible accumulation,” which is “marked by a direct confrontation with the rigidities of Fordism. It rests on flexibility with respect to labour processes, labour markets, products, and patterns of consumption” (1990,
Others, such as Marxist scholar Alex Callinicos, have argued that the case for post-Fordism has been overstated in that there is a tendency to exaggerate the changes involved. His criticisms are not directed at Harvey, whose work is not discussed in his book. They are directed at those who posit a “break in capitalism,” for example many of the contributors to the journal, *Marxism Today*, such as Stuart Hall, who posit that we are in “new times” marked by post-Fordism and disorganized capitalism. Callinicos argues that first, Fordism was never as rigid as has been portrayed and that mass production techniques tended to be limited to items such as cars, refrigerators, etc., while items such as clothing were always more ephemeral. He also argues that it is not true that demand for standardized products, even though there may be a range of models on offer. Thirdly, he argues that the case for “flexible specialization” is overstated and the cost involved in “the introduction of flexible manufacturing systems is expensive,” requiring large-scale production to recuperate costs. Lastly, Callinicos argues that the case for a workforce divided by core and periphery is overstated. Callinicos thus argues that while there have been important changes, such as an increase in the “global integration of capital,” and other transformations, the contrast between Fordism and post-Fordism tends to be over-simplified with the result being an exaggeration of the claims made that we are in “new times” (1989, 135-137).

While Harvey argues that these changes have generated changes in production that have provided the ability to produce in small batches and meet the needs of niche markets, he is careful to point out that niche marketing and small scale production does not mean capitalism is becoming more disorganized or that there is any loss of corporate power. In fact, these changes have led to mergers and furthered the consolidation of capital on a global scale, for as Harvey notes “capitalism is ever more tightly organized *through dispersal*” of labour, and consumer markets (1990, 158-159). Harvey identifies the compression of time and space as a contributory factor in the fast turnover of consumer goods as well as other facets of human life. He argues a “major consequence” of this speed-up “has been to accentuate volatility and ephemerality of fashions, products, production techniques, labor processes, ideas and ideologies, values and established practices.” Rather than value durability and stability there is now an emphasis on disposability and instantaneity, that is, “being able to throw away values, lifestyles, stable relationships, and attachments to things, buildings, places, people, and received ways of doing and being” (1990, 285-286). A result of the disintegration of spatial barriers “has been the production of fragmentation, insecurity, and uneven ephemeral development within a highly unified global space economy of capital flows.” Despite an increase in the variety of products on
offer, we can find the same products in almost every corner of the globe (1990, 296). For
Harvey, these changes are symptomatic of the “postmodern condition” which he argues must be
seen within a historical context of the changing needs of capital.

Less pessimistic than Harvey, George Ritzer argues that there “is a growing
homogenization of the American means of consumption and of the goods and services being
purchased.” However, as he points out, “that is not to say that there is not a great profusion and
diversity of commodities available to Americans, but essentially the same profusion of diversity
is increasingly available everywhere. American consumption is characterized simultaneously by
diversity and homogeneity, or ‘homogenous diversity’” which is also becoming characteristic of
other parts of the world (2005, 182). Ritzer argues that most people are happy to see such
homogenization - we like to have a cup of Starbucks coffee no matter where we are.

These arguments not only point to capitalism’s need for novelty and the always new (or
transgressive), but to the routinization of the novel and transgressive, the rapid pace through
which what was transgressive becomes normalized and even boring. Transgression should also
be read as a form of symbolic capital. For Pierre Bourdieu, symbolic capital represented a source
of power, for it consisted in being valued or recognized for a particular competency such as that
of the artist or writer, the unique creative genius (1993). As Donald Kuspit puts it the avant-
garde artist was fetishized and “elevated above others.” The artist was seen as having “special
perceptual power,” insights unavailable to others, and was regarded as “uniquely authentic in an
inauthentic society,” his “deviance and outsidersness” deplored on the one hand, but “admired
and envied” on the other (1993, 2-3). A similar romance with transgression can be located in our
mythologization and admiration of particular outlaws, such as Bonnie and Clyde. In cultural
studies this mythology and idealization of deviance and outsiderness can be found in the work on subcultures, as well as, I would argue, in the calls for voice, the epistemic privilege granted marginalized groups whether racial or working-class youth, in which being outside the norm would, in and of itself, not only give special insight and access to a truth not available to the dominant group, but also guarantee authenticity. The commodification of this mythology of deviance and outsiderness coincides neatly with the expressivist politics of much work in cultural studies. As Frank argued, capitalist ideology emphasizes not conformity but rebellion, standing out from the crowd, individual expression through the consumption of goods - the expression of self through the display of style (which I will return to in chapter five) in which each consumer becomes a producer (discussed further in chapter four). Transgression is what sets us apart and makes us trendy, unique and closer to our true selves.

The Always New – Reality TV

Reality TV, it can be argued, is transgressive. First, it is always in search of the new; it breaches the limitations of defined genres; and it pushes against the limits of social norms in its encouragement of breaches of “acceptable” behavior. Yet, the transgression found in reality TV is a commodified transgression and exemplifies how transgression itself has become part of the reproduction of the dominant order. Despite the historical precedents for what we now associate with reality TV; that is, the crop of programming that began around the year 2000 in the US reality programming has been hyped by producers and the media alike as something new, freshening the landscape of offerings for viewers bored with years of ER and Law and Order. To stay on top in the ratings, producers must constantly seek new ideas and add new twists to
existing formats. For example, in the fall 2006 season of *Survivor*, producers changed the format by segregating tribes by race; white, African-American, Asian, and Hispanic. Even prior to airing, the show had created a huge controversy which was played out in the media as critics argued the segregated tribes would flame racial divisions and promote stereotypes, “transgressing” the line of what was acceptable. Mark Burnett, the producer of *Survivor*, argued the show was always pushing the envelope, looking to go further and further. He conceives the program itself as a social experiment and to avoid staleness he has consistently looked for new twists such as dividing teams by gender or age. Burnett defended the new twist as promoting cultural diversity and racial understanding. Nonetheless, critics charged that the new format was a desperate attempt to increase ratings at the expense of fomenting racism. Despite all the media hype, the tribes were integrated on the third episode: recuperation and resumption of the *Survivor* norm. The premiere won the night in the ratings but dropped from previous premiere episodes; major sponsor General Motors withdrew sponsorship and other advertisers, such as Home Depot and Campbell’s Soup, also dropped the show although none claimed to be dropping their advertising based on the race war theme. *Survivor* is not alone in creating controversy in the search for novelty. Dutch courts have recently refused to stop production of Endemol’s *The Big Donor Show* in which a dying woman selects a recipient for her kidney from a group of three contestants. The show, which aired in June of 2007 in the Netherlands and had attracted global attention, was revealed as a hoax at the end of the show, staged to raise awareness of the shortage of organ donations. Controversy has also swirled around the new reality program, *Kid Nation*, which premiered on CBS in September of 2007. Filmed in New Mexico, the program features forty children, aged eight to fifteen. The children reside on an old film set as they
struggle to build a viable society. New Mexico authorities are investigating the show’s producers for violating child safety and labor laws. Producers tried to circumvent labor laws by claiming the children were paid participants, not employees. Children receive a five thousand dollar stipend for completing the forty day filming. Additionally, parents have come under criticism for exposing their children to the stresses and conditions which their children might be exposed to. For example, as with most reality programs, the children are not allowed contact with their families for the duration of filming.

Reality programming is also seen as genre-bending, violating the textual limitation of a particular genre. Scholars have argued that reality programming exemplifies a new hybridity with its generic intertextuality and play between program forms, such as game shows, documentary and soaps (Holmes and Jermyn 2004). Reality programming is also seen as transgressing the limitations of the black box in its aggressive use of multiple media platforms, such as the internet and cell phones, and its promotion of interactivity. Scholars have also argued that the merger with other mediums pushes limits and creates new experiences, or extends the degree to which audiences become authors and producers, breaching the line between production and consumption.

However, there are other ways Reality TV can be seen as transgressive that are more difficult to paint in a radical light. For example, reality TV has also led to new business models; as discussed in chapter two and in later chapters, reality programming has developed new sources of revenue through the selling of formats. In addition to revenue raised though the syndication of popular British and American shows, the sale of formats allows global media companies to benefit from glocalization, the selling of a template that can be adapted to various
localities. Reality programming is also viewed as changing the broadcasting landscape through its extensive use of product placement. While not completely new, television lagged behind film in integrating advertising into programming; however, with the successful use of product placement in reality programming, other genres are following suit. As discussed in chapter two, reality programming has also contributed to changes in the way networks do business, as new models rely on partnerships with sponsors to cover production costs in exchange for product integration. Thus, as Andrejevic argues, reality TV is at the forefront of the dedifferentiation process which extends the elimination of “the boundary between advertising and content” (2004, 43).

*Fear Factor*

The format for the game show *Fear Factor*, was developed by Endemol Netherlands and originally aired in the Netherlands as *Now or Neverland* in 1998. NBC bought the format and adapted it to the US market, first airing the program as a summer replacement in 2001. In addition to the US version, the *Fear Factor* format has been sold to multiple countries, including the United Kingdom, Poland, Malaysia, India, and Croatia. The format failed in Germany, France, and Australia. In addition to local versions, the US version is in syndication in one hundred countries. *Fear Factor* garnered high ratings for the first few seasons, especially among the coveted 18-49 age group. As time has passed the program has slipped in the ratings. Despite making an effort to freshen the program, in 2006 the program was pulled from the winter schedule and the remaining episodes were broadcast over the summer of 2006. *Fear Factor* is a game show in which contestants compete for $50,000. Initially, the format involved six individual contestants competing for the prize, but with falling ratings the program often
changed the format in an attempt to bring newness to the show and raise ratings. Rather than six individuals the format moved to four teams of two people, usually related in some way – such as couples, mother-son, or twins. The contestants change during each episode, although in season four nine couples competed over seven weeks to win a million dollars. In addition to moving from single contestants to couples, *Fear Factor* introduced several additional “twists,” such as playing the game with contestants from the Miss USA pageant, with Reality TV stars, or from the military. Producers also added a fantasy prize in addition to the $50,000 pot, such as a new car, or a special trip. In the 2005-2006 season *Fear Factor* began shooting segments in different locations, including the set from the film *Psycho*.

The format of *Fear Factor* involves pitting contestants against each other in a series of daring physical stunts. Generally, the format calls for three challenges, two involving acts of physical daring. One stunt usually involves a helicopter or water and, for example, may include dangling from a helicopter while performing a given task or being submerged in water inside a cage and having to free oneself with a key. The other physical challenge, usually the last stunt performed, tends to involve heights or moving vehicles and may require climbing a platform to collect flags, or moving an object between two speeding vehicles. The other stunt, and the one that repels some viewers is the “gross out” stunt in which competitors may be required to eat animal parts, such as blended rats, cockroaches or maggots, or move bugs or other gross-out items from one tub to another using their teeth.

*Fear Factor* bills itself as “extreme” and cautions viewers that the stunts performed are “extremely dangerous” and should not be performed at home. In the opening narration announcer Sandy Thomas asks the audience to, “Imagine a world where your greatest fears
become reality,” and informs viewers that stunts are “designed to challenge the contestants both physically and mentally.” Host Joe Rogan encourages contestants to play off each other’s fears to win the competition. At the close of the show Rogan congratulates the winner and says, “evidently fear is not a factor for you.”

The incitement to transgression found in *Fear Factor* is located in the call for contestants to breach social norms and taboos and push the body beyond the threshold of everyday experience in the performance of physically and mentally trying challenges. For example, one physical challenge required contestants to scoot across a pole suspended between two helicopters flying above a body of water and removing flags. The insinuated point is that contestants are challenging fears that many of us hold, such as a fear of falling, a fear of heights, or a fear of water. However, it is in the gross-out stunts that *Fear Factor* sets itself apart from other reality shows that include physical challenges, such as *The Amazing Race*. The gross-out segments involve the violation of cultural codes and taboos, such as drinking blended worms or drinking or immersing the body in blood. For example, in the *Psycho* shower rescue (they used the *Psycho* film set), a female contestant is handcuffed to the showerhead with pig’s blood pouring from the shower. A male contestant was required to dunk his head into an ice chest filled with moldy gunk to retrieve an axe, break in, and “save” her. Another episode on a couples segment, involved what host Rogan described as “the most disgusting ever.” Couples faced a container filled with lamb brain, octopus, stink beetles, cockroaches, pig snouts and tongue, worms, tarantulas, and animal innards. Each couple was given six pounds of “food” and the couple that could digest the most in twenty minutes won. Anyone who throws up (as often happens) loses the challenge.
While the pleasure for the viewing audience is located in watching contestants push their bodies to the limits of endurance while performing stunts which we might imagine ourselves doing, it should be remembered that these are scripted transgressions. So while, like carnival, contestants and armchair voyeurs may be able to experience a sense of themselves as invincible, any elation can only be read as that which has been allowed and contrived by producers. *Fear Factor* does not demonstrate an appropriation of transgression; it demonstrates transgression as always already commodified; the transgression of taboo becomes a cliche, as Bakhtin argued. Thus, the need for ever more challenging and outrageous stunts as contestants and audiences alike no longer view the challenges as in any way extreme.

The ready normalization of the “violation of taboos” is evident in segments added during season six. *Fear Factor* added a “Home Invasion” segment in which viewers were invited to apply to “challenge their own fears.” Crews visited homes across the country to allow a family to participate in a “gross-out” stunt in their own front yard. Families quickly gobbled down bugs to win a $5000 Capital One credit card and a few moments of fame.

In the summer of 2005 “Fear Factor Live” opened at both the Universal Studios Hollywood and Universal Orlando theme parks. In a press release, Universal Studios referred to “Fear Factor Live” as an “all-new interactive attraction that catapults ordinary people into extraordinary situations allowing them to challenge themselves, conquer their fears and test their physical and emotional limitations” while in front of a live audience. The attraction is referred to as “the most intense audience participatory attraction ever created and will allow the entire family to experience the thrill and emotion associated with extreme, pulse-pounding stunts . . . where they will be taken out of their comfort zone and placed in unfamiliar territory as the
experience preys on basic human fears” (NBC.com 2005).

CEO of Universal Parks and Resorts, Tom Williams claims the Universal theme parks “are known for thrilling, cutting-edge, entertainment” in which “creating an extreme experience such as Fear Factor Live is perfect for us and a perfect way to fit our brand within the NBC brand,” a kind of corporate synergy (NBC.com 2005). Not only do these theme parks again demonstrate how quickly “transgression” is normalized and turned into family fun, they again point to how transgression can not be seen as something apart from the needs of consumer capitalism. Transgression is not subversion, it is brand extension. Like carnival, it is the permitted escape from the everyday, giving permission for a weekend “extreme experience” before the return to work on Monday.

Like other reality programs, Fear Factor, has also extended its brand through deals with sponsors and the creation of novelty products. In 2002, Baskin Robbins entered into a promotional partnership with NBC to create a marketing tie-in, the Fear Factor sundae, which featured Oreo-cookie ice cream, spider gummys, and lime slime. There was also a line of limited edition candies, which featured “gross-out” gummys, such as cockroach bites and eyeballs. In 2006 Fear Factor partnered with Popsicle brand which produced Fear Factor Pop-Ups, with eyeballs and slime. Sweet transgression as family fun.

Wife Swap

The concept for Wife Swap, sometimes referred to as life experiment format, was developed by Stephen Lambert of RDF Media, a leading independent British production company. Hill identifies the life experiment format as being “about transformation, as ordinary people experiment with different lifestyles, values, and work and domestic arrangements” (2005,
First commissioned for production by Channel 4 (UK) in 2003, the program attracted large audiences and the format has consequently been sold to over 27 countries with some countries purchasing not only the format, but the syndication rights to either the British or American programs as well. The format has been sold in territories as diverse as Latin America, Estonia, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Israel. The program has won several awards, including the BAFTA Award for best reality program and the Golden Rose for best reality show at the International Rose D’Or Festival. In the US, *Wife Swap* premiered in 2004 on ABC and was an immediate success, ranking number one for the hour among women age 18 to 34 and increasing ABC’s audience share. *Wife Swap* has continued to fuel ratings for ABC, and is now the most-watched program in its time slot (Monday night) since the 2001-2002 season, as well as one of the highest rated among the 18-49 demographic since the 1997-1998 season on ABC.

The *Wife Swap* format involves two families, each of whom agree to swap wife and mother for a period of two weeks. These swaps involve families with very different lifestyles and values, such as stay-at-home mothers who dote on children and husband or working mothers with little time for home life, pagan families and fundamentalist christians, farm families who value hard work and suburbanites who value style and shopping. The application form, asks applicants to identify which family member is responsible for household tasks, how children are disciplined, how many pets the family owns, the family income and how that income is spent. It is designed to help determine which families to cast to create the most friction and drama. Each couple receives twenty-thousand dollars for their appearance on the program. During the first

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19 BAFTA refers to the British Academy of Film and Television Arts. The Rose D’Or Festival represents Europe’s top television awards.
week of the swap the new wives are to play by the rules of their new household, following a manual left by the departing wife. During the second week the new wife instigates her own rules, running the household her way and usually trying to fix what she sees as wrong with her new “family.” The drama lies in the clash between the two families with conflicting values and lifestyle. Near the end of each episode the couples are reunited and the two couples exchange views about their experience, often criticizing each others’ parenting skills and values, though often claiming that they have learned from the experience. This short, volatile exchange is followed by a quick glimpse at the changes, or lack thereof, each family has made as a result of the swap. In addition to the regular program, *Wife Swap*, has produced reunion shows in which several of the couples talk about how the swap changed their marriage, with some couples claiming it saved the marriage.

The invocation of transgression elicited in the title of the *Wife Swap* series at first created some controversy; but anyone expecting or hoping for displays of sexual transgression would have been disappointed. As in *Fear Factor*, the transgression in *Wife Swap* comes from the breaching of a taboo, the swapping of a wife. However, again, this is a scripted transgression that is always already commodified. By using the terms scripted transgression I am not suggesting that the programs themselves are entirely scripted but that transgression is built into the format of the show. In the case of *Wife Swap*, Bakhtin’s idea of temporary inversion of the social order is helpful. *Wife Swap* can be read as having three phases: during the first phase the status quo is maintained. The new wife meets with her new family and must abide by the rules laid out by the real wife in her manual. Her “role” in the first week is to maintain the family routines and “replace” the real wife, including working at her job, cleaning house, or caring for farm animals.
During this week the new wife develops her own set of rules in response to what she sees as problematic in the family.

During the second week (phase two) there is an inversion of the social order, that is the familial culture, as the new wife turns the family “upside down” instituting her own set of rules. For example, in the case of Jodi Spolansky, a multimillionaire, whose usual routine involved going to the gym, shopping, and “me time,” she found herself driving a bus, chopping wood, and preparing family meals when she switched places with Lynn Bradley. Brad Bradley did little to help his wife around the house. When Jodi changed the rules, Brad was told he had to take over the wood chopping business, help with the cleaning and do all the cooking while Jodi went to the gym and took the family’s daughters out to learn about “me time.” Lynn felt the Spolansky’s spent too much time “doing their own thing” and her rule changes were aimed at making time for the family to be together. She asked Jodi’s husband to fire the three nannies and housekeeper, return from work at a reasonable hour to share a family meal, and read his daughter a bedtime story. In this episode the “cultural collision” is based on class difference; while dining at an upscale restaurant with friends, Jodi’s husband, Stephen, humiliates Lynn by asking her “Did you think you were going up the food chain?” While class differences are often highlighted on *Wife Swap*, many of the culture clashes come from the pairing of families with “extreme” lifestyles. Laura’s family practiced pagan rituals; Laura turned to fairies for guidance, thought sports were evil, and her family did not enforce traditional gender roles. She swapped with Stephanie who thought boys should be tough and girls should do all the cooking and cleaning. When Laura inverted the rules in Stephanie’s house, the boys were not allowed to be involved in
sports and had to spend time meditating at personal altars.  

The last phase is recuperation; the wives return to their husbands and family and the familial culture is restored. There is change; the two couples meet at the end of the switch and there is often a heated exchange as the couples assess each other’s “lifestyle” and perceived shortcomings. But the experience is also viewed as a life lesson; the couples learn to appreciate what they have and to evaluate their own failings as partners and parents. The social order (familial order) is able to accommodate the transgression; it can incorporate what it has “learned” from the experience while keeping the family unit intact. Thus the transgression is not a subversion of the familial order and status quo; it is its confirmation.

*Wife Swap* is also significant in that it can be seen as normalizing surveillance. Zizek argued that transgression should not be seen as a subversion of the norm but as a perversion. In *Wife Swap*, I would argue that this perversion takes place in the inversion of the public and private sphere; the private sphere of the family home and familial culture is exposed to the voyeur’s gaze. The gaze in *Wife Swap* functions on three levels: the gaze of the new wife, the gaze of the family, and the gaze of the viewer. As Zizek argues this perversion does not subvert the moral order; it serves to uphold it (Andrejevic 2004, 173-194; Zizek1992). The voyeurism that is located in *Wife Swap* is little different from the exploitive exposure found on *Jerry Springer*. In our judgemental surveillance of the “other” we assure ourselves of our own superiority.

For Andrejevic, the normalization of surveillance as seen in surveillance-based reality

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20 An Israeli version of *Wife Swap* “pushed the boundaries” and exchanged an Arab wife for a Jewish wife. The Arab wife quit the show and left prior to the end of shooting due to fights with her Jewish “husband.” The Jewish “wife” adapted to the situation and developed a bond with her Arabic “husband,” remaining for the entire filming period. (MacKinnon 2006).
programming fits neatly with the needs of flexible capitalism and its vision of a “consumer committed to ‘making itself seen.’” Not only are our private lives marketed for consumption, “making oneself seen is a form of individuation and self-authentication.” As I discuss in chapter five, consumer capitalism tells us that we can discover and express who we are through consumption. By submitting to surveillance the consumers can make their preferences known. As Andrejevic argues, the desire to express one’s authenticity drives the active “submission to surveillance, which means we don’t just endure the monitoring gaze, we embrace [it]” (2004, 187-189).
CHAPTER FOUR

AUDIENCE UNBOUND: “LOOK MOM - NO HANDS!”

Popular culture is made by subordinated peoples in their own interests out of resources that also, contradictorily, serve the economic interests of the dominant. Popular culture is made from within and below, not imposed from without or above as mass cultural theorists would have it.  
– John Fiske 1989

For some decades now, British cultural studies has tended either to disregard or caricature in a hostile manner the critique of mass culture developed by the Frankfurt School.  
– Douglas Kellner 2002

The emphasis on agency and the desire to locate the possibility for resistance within everyday practices has led cultural studies to explore theoretical positions that can be read as antithetical to the work of the Frankfurt School and the later work of Screen theorists as well as the emphasis of those cultural theorists working within a political economy framework. Whereas these theorists have tended to focus on how the cultural arena served the needs of capital and the maintenance through hegemony of an ideological framework, cultural studies rejected what in this work was seen as elitist, overly deterministic, and offering little space for the resistance cultural studies so desperately wanted to claim. Similarly, the political economists have been viewed as reductionist and deterministic, and, again, denying space for the refusal of servicing the needs of capital even within the commercialized cultural arena. Cultural studies, on the other hand, sought to emphasize freedom and agency, often drawing on the theoretical legacies that would support their contentions of resistance, such as the work of Gramsci, de Certeau, Bakhtin and Foucault.

It should not be surprising that these apparently oppositional theoretical frameworks should greatly influence theoretical conceptions of the audience and audience activity. Part one
of this chapter is concerned with identifying those questions asked by the Frankfurt theorists, Screen theorists, and political economists that too often go missing in the search for and claims of audience agency, resistance, and participation. I suggest that the antipathy toward these positions has led cultural studies to overestimate audience freedoms, cultural democratization, and the possibility for any significant social change taking place at the level of popular culture. I want to suggest that a reevaluation of these schools of thought can lead cultural studies beyond what would seem to be a dead-end - an affirmation of the popular as liberatory and an overlooking of the commercialization of every aspect of our lives.

The second part of the chapter addresses the issue of audience activity through an exploration of the reality programs *Big Brother* and *American Idol*. The opportunity for interactivity in reality programming has been seen as having democratizing potential. I argue that any such claims must be considered in relation to the needs of production and advertising. Consumer interactivity is helping determine new marketing strategies; we are marketing to ourselves. Ultimately, I argue that the promise of democratization is illusory. Moreover, we must question the significance of audience activity, for activity in and of itself is meaningless; is such activity in any way contributory to a progressive end or only diversionary?

**The Frankfurt School – Pessimism and Passivity?**

While it is not my purpose to fully explore the work of the Frankfurt School theorists, two well-known essays have often been cited as representing the negativity and pessimism associated with this school of thought. The first, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” written by Adorno and Horkheimer and published in *The Dialectic of*
Enlightenment, can be read as a mournful rant, not over the loss of high culture, but over the loss of any culture not reducible to exchange value. It is this reduction which, in their view forecloses the possibility of resistance to the status quo, any questioning of social conditions, that they mourn. While broadly portrayed as elitist defenders of high art against the encroachment of the low, this charge ignores many of the arguments made in their work. First of all, like Williams, the two differentiate between mass-produced culture and the culture of the masses. This is made clear in Adorno’s essay, “The Culture Industry Revisited,” in which he states, “In our drafts we spoke of ‘mass culture.’ We replaced that expression with ‘culture industry.’” He goes on to say that “The culture industry must be distinguished in the extreme” from “something like a culture that arises spontaneously from the masses themselves, the contemporary form of popular art” (2000, 231). Secondly, they both recognize the limitations of high art and the possibilities of low art. They argue that “those who deplore it [low art] harbor illusions about society, failing to recognize how bourgeois art “was bought from the outset with the exclusion of the lower class.” For Adorno and Horkheimer the split between high and low art itself expresses the truth of the social condition. Both harbor the possibility of exposing these social truths. However, the commodification of culture reduces such possibility, flattening out the differences between the two (2002, 107-108). Adorno writes that this integration of consumers from above destroys the seriousness of high art in “speculation about its efficacy; the seriousness of the lower perishes with the civilizational constraints imposed on the rebellious resistance inherent within it as long as social control was not yet total” (2000, 231-232).

By painting the Adorno and Horkheimer’s essay with broad stokes, and focusing on their “anti-populism,” critics have often failed to engage in a more nuanced reading which might
uncover a far more complex set of concerns than is generally acknowledged. These analyses, developed further throughout the collected essays and in other works, address many of the concerns of the Frankfurt School in the development of a critical understanding of the culture industry. Adorno and Horkheimer argue that the culture industry exerts control over individual consciousness, naturalizing a commodification of existence in such a way that the ideology ingrained in cultural products goes unrecognized. As the space between cultural product and everyday existence is narrowed, the naturalization of the subordination of consumers to production becomes more absolute.

Adorno and Horkheimer argue that product differentiation is illusory, an underlying sameness masked by an appearance of choice. Modern life is marked by routine and uniformity, and “what parades as progress in the culture industry, as the incessantly new which it offers up, remains the disguise for an eternal sameness” (Adorno 2000, 233). The culture industry allows for transgression and deviance, for transgression confirms the validity of the system, thus they extend their argument to the incorporation (or cooption) of resistance. This argument also extends to “the principle of individuality,” which Adorno and Horkheimer find problematic from the outset, arguing that individuation was never really achieved, as “every bourgeois character expressed the same thing, even and especially when deviating from it: the harshness of competitive society” (2002, 125). The commodification of culture has enabled pseudoindividuality, and “the peculiarity of self” is no more than “a socially conditioned monopoly commodity misrepresented as natural” (2002, 125).

Adorno and Horkheimer argue that mass culture is not democratizing as is claimed, for it does not allow the masses access to privilege; the broad access to cultural products however,
leads to an acceptance of the way things are. First, the commodification of culture has led to a leveling of cultural products. The widespread availability of the same cultural products to both the middle and lower classes mutes class differences, thereby making them less visible. Second, the culture industry promises pleasure and fulfillment, a promise which remains unfulfilled. Thus, there is always a feeling of want and a need for more consumption. Culture and advertising are merged, selling the consumer on the need for ever more goods, the promise of pleasure creating insatiable consumption. For Adorno and Horkheimer, the creation of false needs, of the escape and pleasure offered by the culture industry, ensures both continued consumption and the mollification of the working classes as critical thought is deflected through amusement. Cultural products are dehistoricized; we consume unreflexively, even when distracted. The culture industry is naturalized; it appears to be outside the realm of human control.

Adorno and Horkheimer also discuss symbolic capital; they argue that “everything has value only insofar as it can be exchanged, not insofar as it is something in itself” (2002, 128). For consumers, the use value of cultural products is prestige: being seen with the “right products” and brands. People’s sense of self and identity become inextricably linked with style, that is with a consumer lifestyle and leisure.

Further, Adorno and Horkheimer discuss the myth of success and idea of luck. Here they argue that the idea of luck, or chance, again keeps the masses in their place. They argue that while people still cling to a mythology of success they have begun to recognize that effort, in and of itself, may not lead to success. The promise of success is then bolstered by the idea of chance, the possibility of being smiled on by fortune. The introduction of chance to the equation again
serves to ease one’s own lot in life; for everyone knows that there can only be one winner. Thus chance both keeps open the possibility of success, of winning the prize, while offering explanatory power for not winning.

Adorno and Horkheimer believed that Critical Theory must be contextualized within a historical framework. They recognized that analysis must change as conditions change. In the 1969 preface to a reprint of *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, they write that they “do not stand behind everything in the [original] book . . . [for] that would be incompatible with a theory which attributes a temporal core to truth instead of contrasting truth as something invariable to the movement of history.” However, they argue that they “did not underestimate the implications of the transition to the administered world” (2002, xi).

In *One Dimensional Man*, first published in 1964, Marcuse echoes many of the concerns of Adorno and Horkheimer. Marcuse argues that the demand for rights and liberties has been replaced with complacency; a more comfortable life and the need for identification through commodities, “make servitude palatable and perhaps even unnoticeable” (1966, 24). In his essay, “The Conquest of the Unhappy Consciousness: Repressive Desublimination,” Marcuse argues that, while the higher culture rarely lived up to its own ideals, and recognizes its exclusions, it nonetheless offered hope and a set of ideals of how life could be different. “The flattening out of the antagonism” between high culture and reality has resulted in a one-dimensional society, in which idealism has been co-opted into the established order, creating social cohesion, and foreclosing the possibility of refusal (1966, 56-58). Marcuse historicizes desire, arguing that the collapse of artistic alienation (sublimation) and its incorporation into the commodified everyday results in desublimation, a repressive desublimation “which can afford to grant more than before
because its interests have become the innermost drives of its citizens,” an extension of liberty
which intensifies domination (1966, 72). Thus, Marcuse explores what he sees as a transition;
how desire, pleasure and happiness become complicit with domination, not resistance.

Marcuse, like Adorno and Horkheimer earlier, argues that the culture industry has
reduced all culture to commercials, with art, politics and religion all becoming commodity
forms. The process of commodification strips culture of its potential, incorporating antagonism,
“the unhappy consciousness of a divided world,” so that culture can no longer be seen as a site of
resistance but only as maintaining the status quo (1966, 61-64). For Marcuse, the internalization
of alienation, that is, the domination present in mature capitalism, was harder to overcome than
earlier economic exploitation as it was hidden behind a mask of harmony and abundance. More
than false consciousness, Marcuse argues that mature capitalism creates false needs to ensure
continued consumption (Agger 1992a).

Given the position of the Frankfurt School, its sense that mass-produced culture
foreclosed upon the possibility of locating resistance to the status quo, the reality of everyday
life, through art (high or low), it is not surprising that contemporary cultural studies, with its
emphasis on resistance everywhere, has sought to distance itself from the Frankfurt position.

Cultural Studies Dismissal of the Frankfurt School

Nealon and Irr have suggested that, “the Frankfurt School has had a particularly difficult
relation to the myriad of discourses and methodologies of contemporary theory that travel under
the name ‘Cultural Studies.’ On many accounts, in fact, Cultural Studies gets off the ground
precisely by rejecting the Frankfurt School and its style of critical analysis” (2002, 3). For a
discipline that has devoted volumes to its own self-definition, cultural studies has remained surprisingly silent when it comes to articulating a relationship between the work of the Frankfurt School and its own work. The silence of cultural studies is evidenced by such tomes as the anthology, *Cultural Studies* (1992), a reader still regarded as a classic cultural studies text. Almost eight hundred pages in length, Adorno and Horkheimer are mentioned only once, in regard to a discussion of radio.¹ As Imre Szeman has argued, when the work of the Frankfurt School is addressed in cultural studies, “its importance derives almost entirely from the negative lesson to be taken from it,” an example of what should be avoided, that is, its pessimism and elitism (2002, 61).

A second major cultural studies anthology, *The Cultural Studies Reader*, edited by Simon During, takes a different approach. Rather than ignore the Frankfurt School, the anthology positions an abridged version of Horkheimer and Adorno’s essay, “The Culture Industry” at the beginning of the book. However, During’s editorial comments that precede the essay point to the reasoning behind the placement; it is not to highlight a theoretical legacy, but rather to offer an example of what cultural studies is not (1999, 31-32). First, During emphasizes that the essay be seen in historical context, implying that the historical conditions that were true at the time (prior to the end of the Second World War) are no longer applicable, that is that the “culture industry was far less variegated than it was to become” (1999, 32). Thus, During adds, “this helps to explain how Adorno and Horkheimer neglect what was to become central to cultural studies; the ways in which the culture industry, while in the service of organized capital, also provides the opportunities for all kinds of individual creativity and decoding” (1993, 32). During’s remarks

¹ Discussing the use of radio during the Hungarian revolution of 1956, Anna Szemere states that Adorno and Horkheimer “note the importance of the mass media for totalitarian systems” (1992, 627).
point to the nature of the relationship between the Frankfurt School and cultural studies. First, During’s comments suggest that the milieu of cultural studies is late capitalism, a period in which changes in capitalist production have allowed for greater variegation and therefore opened a space for “creativity and decoding,” thus dating the work of Adorno and Horkheimer and implying that their work is inapplicable to contemporary culture (1999, 32). Secondly, whereas Adorno and Horkheimer stressed the limitations imposed upon the individual by organized capital, During stresses the possibility for resistance within capitalist hegemony through creative consumption and decoding (Szeman 2002 62-63).

The positioning of the Frankfurt School as the polar opposite of cultural studies is also evident in the discussion of consumption in Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of The Sony Walkman (1997) authored by Paul du Gay, Stuart Hall, Linda Janes, Hugh Mackay and Keith Negus, all, with the exception of Negus, working with the Open University at Birmingham. In their criticism of the “production of consumption” perspective, such as that of Adorno and Horkheimer, they argue that this position views consumption “as thoroughly saturated and determined by the logic of late capitalist production” and “citizens are turned into a passive mass of consumers.” They identify two major problems with this perspective; first, given that production determines consumption, “there is no space for human agency.” Secondly, the products of mass culture are viewed as inauthentic, offering fulfillment of false needs created by producers, whereas high culture is seen as authentic – a position the authors see as elitist and patronizing (1997, 87-88).

In John Docker’s rant against the Frankfurt School’s “German Jewish Intellectuals,” he argues that the Frankfurt School basically merged Marxism and Leavisitism to create an elitist
and classist school of thought in which only modernist art has any value and “readers are positioned by the Culture Industry essay as passive, as having to automatically accept as received truths their totalizing judgements,” (1994, 41) and accusing Adorno and Horkheimer of coming dangerously close to advocating mass censorship. Scorning the possibility of “indoctrination” and false consciousness, Docker equates modernity, and subsequently any conception of truth, value or judgement, with elitism. Docker excludes Walter Benjamin from his rant, as he identifies him as a “rogue” member of the Frankfurt School that did not share in the “pessimistic modernist positions” of Adorno and Horkheimer, instead defending popular culture and audience pleasures; thus Docker succeeds in reducing the complexity of Benjamin’s work into a portrait of Benjamin as a mascot of mass media (1994, 46-47).

The casting of the Frankfurt School as elitist pessimists has influenced later cultural studies scholarship, in which Critical Theory is often dismissed out-of-hand, usually with one-liners; such as Holmes and Jermyn’s assertion, cited earlier, that the tradition is “characterized by a paternalistic and conservative impulse” in regard to their assumptions of audience passivity (2004, 10). However, there are those who call for a cultural studies that integrates the insights of the Frankfurt School.

Both Douglas Kellner and Ben Agger have called for an eclectic cultural studies which includes the work of the Frankfurt School as well as political economy. For Kellner, the advantage is what he calls a multiperspectival approach which addresses some of the shortcomings of cultural studies. Kellner argues that British cultural studies in its early stages shared many of the concerns of the Frankfurt School; that is transdisciplinarity, the economic aspects of cultural production and consumption, and ideology critique. However, a turn to what
he calls a postmodern problematic has resulted in a cultural studies that has turned away from a critical perspective on consumer culture, instead focusing on “local pleasures, consumption, and the construction of hybrid identities from the material of the popular” (1997, 104; 2002, 38). Kellner argues, as I do, that Frankfurt School Critical Theory can act as a corrective to the excessive populism of contemporary work in cultural studies, addressing issues too often overlooked or slighted, such as the commodification of culture, Frankfurt perspectives on reification, ideology critique and domination (2002, 45). For example, Kellner argues that we cannot adequately theorize about dominant and resistive readings without contextualizing media products within systems of domination (1997, 116). Of significant importance to Kellner is the failure of cultural studies to incorporate the insights of political economy, especially the kind of political economy he locates in Critical Theory. As Kellner points out, the failure to address issues of production and to situate culture within that system limits cultural studies ability to grasp a broader picture, that examines the needs of global capital and their expression in culture, rather than simply celebrating the popular (1997, 2002). While Kellner argues that the Frankfurt School perspective is one-sided, it nonetheless offers a different perspective, one sorely lacking in cultural studies. He points out, for example, that the failure to engage high culture, “sacrifices the possible insights into all culture and replicates the bifurcation of the field of culture into a ‘popular’ and ‘elite’” (2002, 36).

Agger’s position is similar to Kellner’s. He calls for a radical cultural studies, that “must resist its own tendencies to be absorbed as harmless, even affirmative, cultural commentary” (1992, 74). For Agger, the work of the Frankfurt School extended a Marxist analysis, carrying the analysis into a new stage of capitalism. Agger argues that the culture industry thesis helped
explain the commodification of culture as well as “politicize the study of mass culture,” and to focus on the “the ideologizing, hegemonizing, and reifying forces at work in cultural commodification” (1992b, 61). Agger is especially influenced by the work of Marcuse, and his work on the social construction of desire and the deep internalization of alienation. In his call for a critical cultural studies, he advocates an eclectic theoretical approach, that includes the insights of the Frankfurt School, that is, the idea of a mass culture that evolved in the late twentieth century, the commodification of culture, the concept of false needs, the passive role of consumption, and the narcotic-like effects of a culture industry. For Agger, cultural studies is split between a popular, conformist, and apolitical version and a cultural studies and a critical cultural studies that has been informed by the work of the Frankfurt School as well as what he calls a critical postmodernism (1992, 5). This theoretical eclecticism tempers the excesses of much recent work.

Agger and Kellner are not alone in calling for a reassessment of the Frankfurt School. Nealon and Irr contend that contemporary theorists are reaching to the Frankfurt School for some of the same “reasons it was once scorned: for notions of interpellated subjectivities whose desires are less liberated and multiplied than they are produced and canalized by a far-reaching, very nearly global culture industry” (2002, 5). According to Imre Szeman, Kellner’s add-on approach is not enough, since the result of Kellner’s add-on Critical Theory results in the suppression of many of the Frankfurt School’s insights, the bracketing of theoretical differences, and the “transforming [of] the Frankfurt School into something akin to cultural studies.” Szeman argues convincingly that in order for cultural studies to seriously engage the Frankfurt School it must engage with it dialectically, considering seriously both what is productive and what is
problematic with regard to contemporary culture. For Szeman this is a dangerous proposal, for it would mean the end of cultural studies as practiced (2002, 65-66).

First, Szeman argues that the conclusions Adorno and Horkheimer reach are less important than their “mode of analysis.” Their essay “The Culture Industry,” is thus, “a critique of the present firmly rooted in a historical consideration of the changing significance of culture.” Cultural studies, on the other hand, is concerned with a small period of time, the present, thereby “Accepting commodity culture as culture . . . all that culture is and can be” (2002, 69). As he points out, this is what Adorno and Horkheimer attacked - that the present state of the culture industry was not all that culture could be. What is missing from cultural studies is an analysis that seriously considers how the culture industry is always in the service of capital. This recognition must necessarily inform theorizing about pleasure, resistance, and decoding. Szeman argues that only by enlarging its framework can cultural studies move beyond the impasse in which it finds itself, and pose necessary questions. He suggests that while the Frankfurt School may not be fully adequate for an analysis of power, it might show cultural studies how it has become stuck (writing endless essays about popular minutia), and suggest a way to move forward (2002, 74). For Irr, one of the most important contributions in the work of Marcuse is also to historicize, specifically, to historicize the “character of all desire.” By examining the historical constructedness of desire, Marcuse is able to point to the relationship between desire and domination within advanced capitalism, and how this transformation effects ideas of resistance. In opposition to the claims of cultural studies regarding the “resistant or compensatory pleasures involved in consumption” Marcuse argues that “liberated desires” should be seen as false, as entirely implicated with domination. Thus, “indulging one’s desires . .
Screen theory is sometimes seen as a radicalized or extreme version of Frankfurt School theory (Brantlinger 1990, Docker 1994). Has become a motor of domination, not resistance to it.” Any romanticising of desire as untouched by the ideology of capitalism fails to account for how deeply entrenched domination has become (2002, 177).

Screen Theory – I’ll Give You Something to Talk About

The British Film Institute (BFI) in London, and British Journal Screen exercised extensive intellectual influence in the development of what became known as Screen theory in the early 1970s. Influenced by Althusserian theories of ideology and Lacanian psychoanalysis, screen theory was interested in analyzing how texts position readers and, like the Frankfurt School, in exposing how the structures of texts function to maintain subservience to the dominant ideology. Developing alongside the heady turn toward structuralism, post-structuralism, as well as the influence of Gramscianism within cultural studies, Screen theory had already begun to make its mark when an early version of Hall’s encoding-decoding essay was published in 1973. While Screen theory, sometimes viewed as an extreme version of Frankfurt School thought, had essentially lost much ground by the early 1980s, it nonetheless gave cultural studies something to talk about. As Graeme Turner has pointed out:

Screen has been influential and controversial, identified with a particular theoretical/critical ‘line’, a particular aesthetics, and a particular political stance. . . Screen marked out a position that opposed much of the cultural studies work done in Britain in the 1970s. While articles published in Screen made important contributions to the development of textual analysis, the journal’s prevailing theoretical position involved an extreme textual determinism. At one point, the CCCS set up a special research group to consider what became known as ‘Screen Theory.’ (1990, 98-99)

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2 Screen theory is sometimes seen as a radicalized or extreme version of Frankfurt School theory (Brantlinger 1990, Docker 1994).
The influence of Screen theory went beyond film, as some of the major figures associated with this work, such as Colin McCabe and Stephen Heath, were significant figures in literary studies as well.

Screen theorists were concerned with fusing a version of Louis Althusser’s concept of an Ideological State Apparatus with a Lacanian conception of the subject. Briefly put, Althusser argued that schools, the family, the media, and the arts, as well as other facets of society act so as to reproduce the ideology of the dominant class within mature capitalism, producing compliant subjects that further the interests of capitalist production, subjects who fail to recognize their own subjugation. Further, Althusser argued that the individual subject was constituted by ideology, that is, that there is no essential self, but rather a subjectivity or identity which is socially produced. For Lacan, subjectivity is constituted through discourse or language; one’s sense of self does not exist prior to entry into the symbolic. In their borrowing from Althusser and Lacan, Screen theorists argued that the cinematic apparatus positions the spectator within a particular subject position in relationship to the text and the dominant ideologies encoded within it. Thus, Screen theorists focused largely on how textual strategies construct subjectivity. Figures such as McCabe were particularly critical of realist texts, which, they argued, served to naturalize the dominant discourse and values, the cinematic codes acting as authoritative narrator closing off questions that alternative, avant-garde texts might pose (Brantlinger 1990; Heath 1981; Turner 1990). For Laura Mulvey, this focus was based on the construction of female subjectivity within the ideology of patriarchy.

Laura Mulvey’s essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” was written in 1973 and was first published in the British film journal Screen in 1975. While Mulvey’s essay is
exemplary of *Screen* Theory, its lasting influence can be credited to the fact that it extended beyond those debates, influencing feminist work on film and other media. If in the US feminist film theory first found its home within the social sciences (along with studies of the mass media), in Britain and on the continent cultural criticism was more closely tied to a humanities tradition. Perceiving the American “images of women” approach as theoretically naive and lacking in sophistication, feminist film theorists in Britain turned toward semiotics, structuralism, and psychoanalysis, theories and methods developing within the field of film studies (and literary criticism) (Judith Mayne 1993; Suzanna DanutaWalters 1995). This theoretical approach, while being synchronic with the “images of women” approach, saw itself “as a polemic against” it (Walters 1995). This “woman as image” approach, typified by Mulvey, was “premised on an assumption that meanings, far from being seized out of the ‘real world’ and simply transmitted through the medium of film, are actually produced in and through the operations of film texts themselves” (Annette Kuhn 1990, 76).

Mulvey’s essay “Visual Pleasure” is informed by Althusserian structuralism, semiotics, and particularly Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. Mulvey argues that the structure and codes of mainstream Hollywood cinema create a gaze that mimics the formation of sexual identities. The cinema, she argues, offers to the spectator two contradictory aspects of the pleasurable structures of looking. One such pleasure, scopophilia, or pleasure in looking, “arises from pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight” (1989, 18). The voyeuristic quality implied in scopophilia is enhanced by the conventions of the cinema; the darkened theatre and the light of the screen “promote the illusion of voyeuristic separation . . . of looking in on a private world” (1989, 17). Secondly, Mulvey argues that the cinema satisfies a
narcissistic aspect of scopophilia, the desire to identify with the image on the screen. Drawing on the Lacanian conception of the mirror stage, Mulvey argues that “it is an image that constitutes the matrix of the imaginary, of recognition/misrecognition and identification, and hence of the first articulation of the I, of subjectivity . . . quite apart from the extraneous similarities between screen and mirror . . . the cinema has structures of fascination strong enough to allow temporary loss of ego while simultaneously reinforcing it” (1989, 18). According to Mulvey the voyeuristic-scopophilic look of classic cinema can be broken down into three different looks: the look of the camera, the look of the audience as it watches the film, and the look of the characters at each other within the film. All of these looks are related to the issue of gender, for Mulvey argues that all act to construct the woman as object of the male gaze. While the passive female figure as spectacle functions to interrupt the diegesis of the film, the active male figure of film acts to propel the narrative forward. Mulvey argues that the male figure “cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification.” Rather, “man controls the film fantasy” and also emerges as “the bearer of the look of the spectator” (1989, 20). The spectator identifies with the male protagonist, the ego ideal first conceived in the mirror stage. Through this identification with the male protagonist the spectator not only gains access to the power and control exercised by the hero — he can also indirectly possess the property of the protagonist, that is, woman.

The female spectator and the question of how women look is noticeably absent in “Visual Pleasure” and Mulvey subsequently addressed this issue in her later essay, “Afterthoughts”, originally published in 1981, in which she acknowledges that her interest in “Visual Pleasure” was “the relationship between the image of woman on the screen and the ’masculinization’ of the spectator position, regardless of the actual sex (or possible deviance) of any real live movie-
Mulvey argues that female spectatorship involves a form of masculinization, which “for women (from childhood onwards) trans-sex identification becomes a habit that very easily becomes second nature. However, this Nature does not sit easily and shifts restlessly in its borrowed transvestite clothes” (1989, 33).

Mulvey’s essay has been broadly criticized and debated as feminists and cultural studies scholars sought to account for audience and female activity and agency. Janet Bergstrom and Mary Anne Doane (1990) argued that the Althusserian/Lacanian paradigm which marked the work of Mulvey as well as many other “psychoanalytic” film theorists was totalizing and over-deterministic as well as given to abstraction and overgeneralization. In opposition to that paradigm feminist critics such as Christine Gledhill, who were influenced by work of the Birmingham School, proposed reading strategies that were “negotiated” and “oppositional.” Gledhill insists on differentiating the female spectator from the female audience and argues that one issue “confronting feminist theory is how to conceive their relationship.” Gledhill argues that cultural texts are “subject to continuous (re-)negotiation” (1998, 67-68). Negotiation, she argues, takes place at the level of the institution, the text, and reception.

The viewing or reading situation effects the meanings and pleasures of a work by introducing into the cultural exchange a range of determinations, potentially resistant or contradictory, arising from the differential social and cultural constitution of readers or viewers . . . This is potentially the most radical moment of negotiation . . . The value of ‘negotiation’, then, as an analytical concept is that it allows space to the subjectivities, identities and pleasures of the audiences. (1998, 70-72)

The work of the critic is to identify what meanings might be generated by a text for different social audiences or “the professionalization of meaning production” (1998, 74).

Bergstrom and Doane point out that these differences speak not just to “a difference
between text based and audience based analysis, but a profound divergence in epistemological premises and theories of subjectivity” (1989, 12). Jackie Stacey contrasts the two paradigms by contrasting their analytical interests and proclivities; film studies is interested in spectator positioning, cultural studies in audience readings; textual analysis versus ethnographic methods, meaning as production-led versus meaning as consumption led, passive viewer versus active viewer, unconscious versus conscious, and pessimistic versus optimistic. While arguing that work within cultural studies may help feminist film theory move beyond what she sees as lacking in feminist theories of spectatorship, she cautions against a naive populism, arguing that “pleasure and activity should not simply be celebrated . . . ‘Activity’ in and of itself is not a form of resistance” (1994, 47). Judith Mayne also warns against overly celebratory accounts of negotiated readings, arguing that “negotiation” is not in itself indicative of “resistant” or “oppositional” readings, and argues that concepts such as negotiation are “only useful if one is attentive to the problematic as well as the ‘utopian’ uses to which negotiation can be put by both the subjects one is investigating and the researchers themselves” (1993, 98).

Nonetheless, Mulvey’s work has continued to influence later work on spectatorship and conceptions of the audience. Ann Kaplan, for example, continues to work within a Lacanian framework, however defensively. In her book, *Looking for the Other: Feminism, Film, and the Imperial Gaze*, Kaplan attempts to show parallels between the structures of the male gaze as theorized by Mulvey and what she calls the “imperial gaze.”

The Imperial gaze reflects the assumption that the white western subject is central, much as the male gaze assumes the centrality of the male subject. . . . anxiety prevents this gaze from actually seeing the people being looked at . . . The anxiety arises from the fragility of being in the “master” position. Masters unconsciously know that mastery cannot remain theirs forever: there’s always the threat of being toppled. . . . Like the male gaze, it’s an objectifying gaze, one that refuses mutual gazing . . . what I am calling a “looking
Kaplan argues that while psychoanalysis is problematic it is nonetheless “useful in illuminating the ways in which racism functions” (1997, 100) and her own use of psychoanalysis is as a tool for understanding the development of subject formation, “the very structures that inter-racial looking relations rely on,” (1997, 126) and suggests that a revisioned psychoanalysis might be “essential in understanding the psychic aspects of this racialized subject formation” (1997, 129).

While this work has continued to theorize the ways in which the spectator position is constrained, other work has used Mulvey to open a space for particular types of spectatorship. Lesbian film theorists, for example, have argued that a psychoanalytic approach cannot fully account for the position of the lesbian spectator, nor do they want to deny some sense of “agency” (Nataf 1995; Whatling 1997). Nataf seizes upon Mulvey’s concept of oscillation to argue that from a transgressive and queer perspective, however, it is this refusal of a stable identity and this oscillation and play which could have radical consequences for the pleasure of the resisting subject and her interpretations of the text (1995, 63). Nataf argues that the black lesbian spectator has a “schizophrenic relationship” with the cinema and that pleasure is to be found in “the ‘radical feminine misbehavior’, [of] the blatant breaking of codes and rules” (1995, 62). Nataf thus grants the spectator agency in that “queer may be the next register of distancing, of radical camp misreading” and argues a queer reading is a deviant reading (1995, 59). Clare Whatling, on the other hand, argues that while texts do not possess a single narrative function and are open to appropriation by the lesbian reader for the purposes of identification and pleasure, she nevertheless warns that, “the pleasure offered by these appropriations is never ipso facto either subversive or transgressive” (1997, 58).
bell hooks has also worked through and against Mulvey’s work. hooks argues that “Black female spectators have had to develop looking relations within a cinematic context that constructs our presence as absence” hence for a black woman to enjoy mainstream cinema she must “close down critique” (1993, 293). hooks argues that while not all black women are able to see differently and develop an oppositional gaze, those not “duped” by the cinema would do so; again, hooks is searching for agency on the part of the spectator by finding that as “critical spectators, Black women participate in a broad range of looking relations, contest, resist, revise, and interrogate on multiple levels” (1993, 300).

**Cultural Studies Reaction to Screen Theory**

Essays by both Stuart Hall and David Morley were published as a consequence of the special study group set up at Birmingham in 1977-1978 in reaction to *Screen* theory. For Hall what differentiates *Screen* theory is the break from what he calls “semiotics 1,” that is the early work of Barthes and Althusser which identified “signification as a practice for the production of meaning” (1980c, 157) and dethroned the Cartesian subject, and “semiotics 2,” the infusion of Lacan and later work by Althusser in which the subject becomes a position fixed “in a certain relation to knowledge and language” (1980c, 158). The resulting “ambitious” theory sought to explain how we become social subjects through language, fixed by ideology in which “the politics of ideological struggle thus becomes exclusively a problem of and around ‘subjectivity’ in the Lacanian sense” (1980c, 159). This is accomplished through what Hall identifies as a series of reductions; first, *Screen* theory identifies homologies, such as, “ideology is structured like a language,” which Hall argues are then not only seen as like but as “the same” (1980c,
Secondly, the Lacanian psychoanalytic process of subject formation is privileged as having explanatory power, so that everything occurs at the level of subjectivity and “the social formation has been made to disappear” (1980c, 160). Thus, Hall argues that the universal subject of philosophy is replaced by the universal subject of psychoanalysis, in which all subjectivities are constituted in the same way – a “trans-historical and trans-social” subject. Therefore, Hall asserts that Screen theory fails to offer an adequate explanation of how “specific ideologies” function at a “concrete, historically determinate level” (1980c, 160-162). Ultimately, Hall argues that Screen theory is caught in a trap of its own making, for it is impossible to conceptualize how ideological struggle can take place when the subject is always already positioned within a particular ideology (such as patriarchy), and would mean a struggle against language itself.

David Morley’s criticisms of Screen echo many of the concerns voiced by Hall. He identifies as problematic the “universalist” theory of subject formation adapted from Lacan, and thereby the argument that texts reproduce the primary positioning of psychoanalysis, outside of any encounter of text and reader with “social and historical structures and from other texts” (1980, 163). Morley questions whether all “discursive effects” can be reduced to “a single, universal set of psychic mechanisms” that constitute subjectivity, rather than interdiscourse, and concrete, individual histories (1980, 163-164). Foreclosing on the possibility of contradictory readings, since all readings are already “predetermined at the psychoanalytic level,” Morley argues that readers are reduced to “bearers or puppets of their unconscious positioning,” unable to resist the ideology inscribed in the text (1980, 164,167). Thus, Screen theory denies “the polysemic nature of signs and . . . the interrogative/expansive nature of readings,” thereby denying the possibility of agency (1980, 167).
John Docker’s account of *Screen* theory is not unlike his account of the Frankfurt School. Likening the work of McCabe to that of Adorno and Horkheimer in the 1940s and Leavis in the 1930s, Docker finds *Screen* theory guilty of modernist elitism and crude reductionism. Docker takes McCabe and structuralism to task for what he sees as the binary oppositions always being created. He argues, for example, that classic realists texts are far more complex, open, and inexhaustible than McCabe’s totalizing notion of the text suggests, finding problematic the distinction McCabe draws between classic realist texts and “ideal ‘revolutionary art,’” examples of which Docker finds boring in contrast to Hollywood film (1994, 72-73). For Docker, McCabe’s distinctions between texts are little more than symptoms of his modernist elitism, and their attraction to the practices of literary and media studies, “perhaps . . . needs to be explained in terms of 1970s radical modernists’ infantile desire for certainty, certainty about the essential truth of mass culture and the necessity to oppose it in absolute ways” (1994, 73). Docker’s criticism of Mulvey centers on her use of a Lacanian paradigm, which he sees as too linear, although he fails to fully explore her use of Lacan. As with McCabe, he dismisses Mulvey’s call for alternative cinema, and her problematizing of pleasure in traditional film with the simple comment, “Hurry upon us, grey world” (1994, 76).

**Stuart Hall and the Shifting Grounds of Cultural Studies**

If agency was always seen as constrained by structural determinants, such as class positionality, in the work of Williams and Hoggart, the grounds began to shift under Hall’s leadership. Stuart Hall has summarized the break with mass media research as found in communications research and the Frankfurt School as a break with “the models of ‘direct
influence’”; a break with the notion “of media texts as ‘transparent’”; a break a passive conception of the audience; and a reinsertion of the role of ideology in media texts which had been evacuated in the American model (1980a, 117-118). His seminal essay, “Encoding and Decoding in the Televisual Discourse,” (1973) traces this shift as well as later shifts within cultural studies which increasing focused on audience agency and resistance.

As Philo and Miller have argued, the early version of Hall’s essay, published in 1973, sought to ground semiology in historical reality. Here Hall was concerned with the contrast “between reality and a mythical/ideological account” and how such accounts might “mislead audiences” (Philo and Miller 2001, 52). However, by 1980, in his essay “Encoding/Decoding,” the stress in the essay has shifted to how audiences decode texts differently and any reference to reality is largely missing.

In Hall’s “Encoding/Decoding” essay he identifies three positions from which audiences decode texts. The first is the dominant or hegemonic position, in which the audience “decodes the message in terms of the reference code in which it has been encoded,” that is the meaning is taken exactly as intended (1980a, 136). Secondly, he identifies a negotiated position, in which “contains a mixture of adapt and oppositional elements. It accords the privileged position to the dominant definition of events while reserving the right to make a more negotiated to ‘local conditions’” (1980a, 137). Lastly, Hall identifies a viewer who understands the embedded codes, but decodes the message in a “contrary way.” The viewer “detotalizes the message in the preferred code in order to retotalize the message within some alternative framework of reference. . . . operating with what we must call an oppositional code” (1980a, 137-138).

Intentional or not, the result of Hall’s model “was to shift the attention away from
contestation over reality and to focus instead simply on the text and its interpretation” (Philo and Miller 2001, 52). This shift traces the trajectory of cultural studies. By focussing on the interpretation of texts, cultural studies scholars “lost a crucial link with the material world” (Philo and Miller 2001, 53). Philo and Miller identify two problems with assumptions of the active audience approach: “first, the assumption that texts can mean whatever audiences interpret them to mean...; second, the assumption that the producer of a text can describe the world in an indefinite number of ways and that there is no recourse to an agreed reality to evaluate the description” (2001, 49-50). The resulting implications of this approach is an evacuation of questions of “power and interests” (2001, 58). Philo and Miller argue that “the suggestion is that a text will mean completely different things to different audiences” is contradicted in their own research and that of The Glasgow Media Group. Their own work “suggests varied audience groups have a very clear understanding of what is the intended message and can reproduce it very accurately” (2001, 49-50).

John Clarke has also been critical of this shift, arguing that the “stress on creativity and polysemy” and the pleasures of texts have stressed the active role of the consumer, in which everyone “is a cultural expert,” “cast as cultural bricoleurs,” manipulating symbols and “assembling their own distinctive combinations of style from the treasury of available signifiers” (1991, 83-84). For Clarke, the view of consumers as active social agents is a positive step and represents a gain over what he sees as the pessimism of those views of mass consumption which position consumers as passive victims. Yet, he argues, this work has also tended to invert the “errors of the pessimists,” focusing on the creativity of consumption and ignoring commodity relations, whereas the pessimists focused on exchange and ignored the practice of consumption
(1991,85). As Clarke points out:

The effect, ironically, is to replicate that view of capitalism which capitalism would most like us to see: the richness of the market-place and the freely choosing consumer. The other side - the structures of production and the inequalities of the marketplace – are missing, and these absences emphasize the ‘free-floating’ quality of the sign, making it available for any use or meaning that may be attached to it. (1991, 85)

This conception of consumption, emphasizes the “shift towards consuming individualism” at the expense of collective, political agency, as though consumption were the only site of political struggle (1991, 85-86).

As should be clear, my concern with this shift in cultural studies is that in the celebration of audience freedoms and resistant readings, there has been a loss of any attempt to recognize the constraints on audiences and the relationship between production and consumption. Without an acknowledgement of the effects of structural determinants we are in effect riding a bicycle with no hands; our analyses lose any explanatory power. Resistance is conceived in individualized terms and everything remains the same as we “play” with signifiers.

**Reality TV – The Democratization of Television or a Kinder, Gentler Big Brother?**

Reality TV is, arguably, a cultural studies’ dream come true, especially in regard to arguments concerning audience agency or activity and resistance. For many cultural studies scholars, reality TV is viewed as a democratization of televison in which the “common folk” participate as contestants, contribute to the outcome of the program by voting for contestants, and participate on associated web sites, both “official” and unofficial. For Holmes and Jermyn, for example, reality TV can be seen as putting to rest any lingering doubts regarding audience agency versus the dire view of a passive audience suggested by the Frankfurt School. However, I
would suggest that the claims for agency and resistance are often overstated. Moreover, there is often a reluctance to engage with questions that Critical Theory might pose; for example, there tends to be an assumption that activity is, in and of itself, a good, and that it constitutes, or may constitute, resistance. Thus, unlike the Frankfurt theorists, much of this work fails to engage with questions regarding how activity may, in fact, signify active participation in one’s own domination, that is, how activity may involve acting against one's own best interest. Secondly, the failure to situate this activity within the context of advanced capitalism, to ask how such activity might serve the needs of capital, as critical theorists and political economists such as Garnham suggest, forecloses the possibility of a more complex analysis that might shed light on the actual significance of such activity and resistance.

The reality program *Big Brother* is often cited as an example of the democratizing aspects of reality programming. Developed by Dutch television producer John De Mol and his production company, Endemol, *Big Brother* first aired in the Netherlands in September of 1999 and has since been adapted and has become a hit in countries around the world, including Croatia, Ecuador, India, South Africa, Thailand, and the United States. In the United States, *Big Brother* first aired in 2000 and continues to draw ratings although it has never met with the same success as *Survivor*, or the phenomenal success of the program in several other countries, such as the United Kingdom. The format for *Big Brother*, despite changes and adaptations made by

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3 There has been a long-running legal dispute over the format of *Big Brother*. Endemol had purchased an option to produce the *Survive!* format developed by Charlie Parsons in 1996 and renewed the option in 1997. Endemol never produced *Survive!* instead introducing *Big Brother* in the Netherlands in 1996. Parsons and Castaway Productions, which now owns the *Survive!* format, argued that the *Big Brother* format bore a striking resemblance to the format of *Survive!* including contestants nominating and voting on eviction, the sequestering of a group of strangers to live together for a period of time during which they competed in various challenges, and the granting of immunity. In 2004 the Dutch Supreme Court upheld earlier rulings that the *Big Brother* format did not infringe on the intellectual property of the format owned by Castaway productions, despite similarities in the programs.
various countries, has basically remained the same. The concept involves sequestering a group of people for a prescribed period of time in a house designed to capture and record the housemates every move. The housemates are cut off from the outside world, and, while early renditions of the format involved living in a bare-bones home environment with only essentials and limited food rations, many countries now situate the program in a modern, comfortable environment, often with luxuries such as saunas. The housemates are assigned weekly tasks or challenges by the producers, cameras record both group interaction as well as the individuals’ feelings and frustrations of housemates expressed in the diary room where contestants talk to “Big Brother,” and housemates each nominate housemates for weekly eviction. After narrowing down the field by selecting housemates with the most eviction nominations, viewers are given the opportunity to vote for the person they want evicted from the house. The evicted contestant must leave the house immediately and is interviewed upon leaving by the show’s host. In the United States the format was changed after a season so that viewers did not vote on evictions, only housemates. Viewers do vote for “America’s Choice,” favorites who win small prizes, and have been allowed to vote on letting an evicted contestant return as well as selecting which contestants from previous seasons would participate in the 2006 “All-Stars” version.

The avenues through which Big Brother are seen as democratizing television have been identified by Tincknell and Raghuram. First, they argue that the contestants are viewed as being ordinary people and that reality programs have often sought to include diverse class and racial groups broadening the opportunities for such groups to be seen and to speak (despite the screening of contestants to ensure that participants are of a particular age, somewhat attractive, and a “mix” that will create tension and drama). This ordinariness encourages audiences to both
consider the possibility of being contestants and to identify with contestants, narrowing the space between audience and text and blurring such lines and distinctions. Second, the availability of access to *Big Brother* across multiple platforms offers opportunities for participation at varying levels and in a multitude of ways. *Big Brother* is often seen as one of the first programs to incorporate multiple platforms into the program, offering twenty-four hour feeds from house cameras on the web, with internet broadcasting enabling fans to view the house 24/7 using technologies such as WAP (Wireless Application Protocol) to watch the house, even when away from home, on their cell phones. In addition to watching the housemates 24/7, fans can “chat” about the program in chatrooms dedicated to discussion of *Big Brother*. Lastly, *Big Brother* offers the opportunity for the audience to participate in the outcome of the program through voting out contestants and suggesting tasks for the housemates. *Big Brother* hosts, such as Davina McCall in the U.K., actively encourage the audience to see themselves as having control over the outcome of the developing story within the house (Tincknell and Raghuram 2004, 252-269).

For Tincknell and Raghuram, reality TV requires that cultural studies rethink arguments about audience agency. They point out that, while researchers such as David Morley sought to locate audience agency in their ethnographic work on audiences, and Fiske through semiotic resistance, the focus in cultural studies has been one which “was predicated on the assumption that activity involves an intellectual engagement *with* a text, rather than an intervention *in* a text” (2004, 253). Thus, scholars such as Fiske and Morley sought to demonstrate how audiences refuse dominant meanings and produce oppositional ones. Agency and activity were linked to reception, not production. However, they suggest that reality TV texts, with the opportunities
offered for audience interaction via participation as contestants, through interactive media, and voting, allow audiences to intervene in the text, at the level of production. In essence, they argue that the changed relationship between text and audience in *Big Brother* destabilizes “assumptions about authorship and authority in media texts,” with the audience becoming the author of *Big Brother* (2004, 264).

Tincknell and Raghuram are not alone in their positive evaluation of *Big Brother*. Holmes offers a similar argument suggesting that *Big Brother* “potentially fosters an equally intimate relationship between participant and viewer. The blurring of the distinction between audience and contestant is also shaped by the interactivity of the programme” (2004, 117). Misha Kavka and Amy West in their discussion of *Big Brother* go so far as to suggest that reality programming may offer a new way of thinking about community and democratic participation. They argue that, “The great amount and variety of reality programming suggests that new Reality TV audiences seek, through television consumption, a greater sense of community and even agency (and in that sense ‘consumption’ is hardly a passive activity.) The intimate and involved sense of community evoked by Reality TV . . . thus might be considered a counterbalance to . . . [a] more outmoded model of the ‘public’ based on civic participation in the historical world” (2004, 138).

Most notable in the work of Tinknell and Raghuram, as well as Kavka and West, is what is missing. Unfortunately, Tincknell and Raghuram never engage with the economic aspects of audience participation failing to address, for example, how voting increases corporate profit, the reduced production costs of reality programming, or suggest that such participation may in fact be a form of domination. They do warn, in a limited way, that activity should not be
romanticized or seen as inherently radical. However, in their attempt to move the site of production to the audience, they limit their explanatory power, ignoring the fact that reality programming is, by and large, a product of global media corporations. Absent from the work of Kavka and West is the suspicion that marked Critical Theory; there is no questioning of what audiences seek, no recognition of desire as historically constructed, no questioning of consumption as sublimation. How can we imagine substantive change without the “outmoded” model of public participation?

Unlike the positive positions above, Gareth Palmer is more cynical. Like Androjevic, Palmer is concerned with the issue of surveillance. While Palmer does not consider economic contexts, he does, in a sense, argue that Big Brother allows us to willingly participate in our own domination. Drawing on Foucault’s work on panopticism, as well as on confession, Palmer argues that Big Brother can be seen as “an experiment in governance” in which housemates basic needs are provided for by a kinder, gentler Big Brother, as opposed to that of Orwell, while their every activity is under surveillance (2003, 182). Surveillance becomes “banal and benign” as audiences focus on the personalities and emotions of proto-celebrities (2003, 183). For Palmer, the Big Brother experiment offered contestants a stage for the fashioning of a self. First, Palmer argues that the program’s confessional aspects offered participants a chance to expose a sexual self; much of the dramatic tension in the program was created through “housemates’ ability to regulate their sexual appetites while being monitored,” aligning sexual choices with the needs of the program (2003, 189). Second, Big Brother offered the opportunity for the

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4 In countries other than the US and the UK contestants were shown having sex – Palmer postulates that one reason for this may be that in countries where celebrity is prized, contestants perceived their interest value would be heightened by their elusiveness. Also, there are different regulatory factors (2003, 191).
construction of a self within the contrived house environment for an age group which views the
self as a work in progress, always being transformed. The staging of a media-self by contestants
was seen as an opportunity to advance their own ambitions – the self as commodity (2003, 188-
192).

Andrejevic’s critical theory/political economy lens asks questions not asked by Tincknell
and Raghuram or Kavka and West, broadening a critical perspective. While he shares some of
the concerns of Palmer, the theoretical legacies he engages lead us in different directions.
Andrejevic’s interest in surveillance is concerned with the role of surveillance in monitoring the
consumer, that is, the economic significance of surveillance in late capitalism. Andrejevic’s
analysis of Big Brother focuses on two aspects; first, he draws on the work of Adorno to discuss
the concept of experience. Second, he addresses the idea of audience interactivity as democracy
and the use of interactivity in the monitoring of consumer preferences. Thus, rather than take
participatory, interactive media as symptomatic of democratization, Androjevic asks who
benefits.

The producers of Big Brother sold the idea of the show as an opportunity for a
transformational experience, a promise that was echoed by the hosts and invoked by the
housemates. Surveillance would intensify the experience, facilitating personal growth.
Contestants were so sold on the value of the experience that in the first season in the US when
producers offered $50,000 to anyone willing to leave the show (so that a more exciting
contestant could be introduced), all contestants refused, arguing the experience itself was
priceless. As Andrejevic points out, “what was being described as priceless was the experience
of comprehensive surveillance . . . what they were doing was legitimating a particular form of
discipline and exploitation as an enhancement of their individual experience,” entering freely into a relationship in which only the winners would earn more than minimum wage while the network raked in profits. For Adorno, in an administered world authentic experience has been eclipsed, replaced by experiment. Authentic experience offers the possibility of a challenge to what is seen as truth, to see beyond the scope of what is given. Identity thinking, on the other hand, which coincides with the waning of authentic experience, leads to unthinking inertia and the acceptance of the way things are as a given, that is, identity thinking becomes naturalized and we cannot imagine things differently (Androjevic 2004, 146-149). Brian O’Connor argues that Adorno’s account of experience provided him with “an invaluable model in that it allows him to explain what he takes to be the irrational acceptance by individuals in society of a social totality which is fundamentally antagonistic to them” (2000, 12). For Andrejevic, this helps to explain contestants’ acceptance of a situation that is basically exploitive. In an administered world, experience itself has been commodified, and the culture industry offers a surrogate, commodified version of authentic experience. The work of Adorno points to the “reality” portrayed by reality TV:

The assertion on the part of the houseguests that they are embarked on the recuperation of authentic experience is false insofar as it backgrounds the ways in which this experience is contrived and engineered, monitored, packaged, and sold. On the other hand, the assertion is true, insofar as it reflects the way in which the constitutive artifice is the reality of experience in the world both within and beyond the confines of the Big Brother compound . . . The hermetic character of identity thinking that coincides with its inability to reach beyond the prison of the concept is enacted by the enclosure of the Big Brother compound (2000, 149-150).

Thus, for Androjevic, Big Brother can be seen as staging the fate of experience in an administered world. Further, Andrejevic argues that the promise that the contrived experimental nature of the house with its continual surveillance, will enhance the authentic nature of the Big
Brother experience serves to not only naturalize surveillance, but to invoke it “as a guarantor of authentic experience.” The Big Brother enclosure as well as the at-home monitoring of the house online can be read as twenty-first-century examples of Adorno’s bourgeois interiority, in which the promise to the cast is one of an authentic experience, while the promise to the audience is the opportunity to watch this authentic experience from the safety of their homes, substituting spying for experience. As Andrejevic suggests, the lab-like setting of the Big Brother enclosure “works to naturalize the contrivance on which it is based by asserting the promise of unmediated access to reality via subtraction of the subjective moment of interference” such as scripting and directing, at the same time highlighting the way life outside is contrived or constructed. Andrejevic argues that such exposure can also serve to naturalize contrivance as the way things are, as “nature and contrivance collapse into one another.” One consequence of this collapse is that it throws into question the critical potential of exposing the constructedness of media content (2000, 150-151).

Big Brother also provides an example of audience participation, the much touted democratization of television, and the bridging of multiple formats, as it was one of the first to push multiple media platforms as offering a greater chance for audiences to participate while at the same time providing another channel for marketing. Andrejevic considers the promise of participation in regard to the promise of control; in the case of the housemates the promise that they had some control of the show and the promise of community, celebrity and control to the viewer.

The first example cited by Andrejevic relates to the idea of control as seen by cast members which, at least temporarily, took the promise of their role in production of the story
literally. In the first US season, cast member George, often seen as a “man of the people,” suggested that housemates seize control of the production by walking out. George argued that the premise of the show, in which housemates compete against each other for a single prize, while all the while living together in a closed environment that created tension, was in opposition to the cast’s interests. For George, a walkout would destroy the show. The houseguests would ensure a place in history and George even thought those who walked out would split the prize money. According to Andrejevic the situation demonstrates that the housemates “accepted the notion that they had gained control precisely because the show’s content depended on their willing submission to comprehensive surveillance; this submission turned them into TV celebrities with the power to ‘make history’ and to challenge the repressive relationships that thwart community in the name of profit” (2000, 155). For at least some of the housemates the reality of reality TV meant being real, resisting the manipulation that encouraged competitiveness and division by standing together.

However, the end result of the contemplated walkout was an increase in ratings. Media interest increased and the suggestion of rebellion created the tension the producers had been looking for. While the housemates abandoned the walkout plan the day following their initial discussion, video of the rebellion continued to be used in promotions. The cast backed away from the plan because it would mean the end of the experience, and they were informed by producers that no one would get the prize money. For Andrejevic this suggests that housemates took a realistic look at their position. They recognized that, “the historical agency they had imagined for themselves was little more than the illusory promise of an advertising campaign for a ‘revolutionary’ new television product” (2000, 156-158).
Big Brother also made promises to the audience; Julie Chen encouraged viewers to see themselves as producers, having the ability to direct the story and influence the outcome. They were also encouraged to see their viewing of Big Brother, both on TV and the internet, as providing a unique experience in which they could work on themselves, exploring long-held opinions and their reactions to the activity of the housemates. Additionally, they could see themselves as members of their own enclosed community, the online community. The online website, hosted by CBS partner AOL, generated a large amount of traffic, extending the audience beyond the limited scope of television and thereby broadening the base. The interactivity of the internet also extended surveillance, providing producers with demographic information about viewers.

The Big Brother website offers access to the housemates’ activities, but it also provides a virtual community which mimics the house – participants share with other strangers online. Moreover, they are encouraged to believe their voice will be heard. Posts began to be read on the air, offering the possibility of instant, albeit anonymous celebrity. In addition to the official website, thousands of individual websites appeared in the first year of production alone. All of these websites, no matter what their depiction of Big Brother, serve to increase interest and advertize for Big Brother. Posts to the AOL website often made suggestions to producers about what the viewer wanted to see and what might boost ratings. Thus, audience labor was used by producers in the customization of the product toward audiences likes and dislikes. However, the extent that such input can be used is currently limited by technology, which, early on, Big Brother pushed to the limit. As Andrejevic points out, “the wealth of information about consumer preferences available through monitoring in the digital enclosure will not be fully
exploitable until the technology and the format develop further in the direction of mass
customization” and the promise of participation is little more than the “colonization of
democratization by the market model . . . reflected in *Big Brother*: that viewers shape the show
according to their preferences, and thereby exercise control over the production process” (2000, 167). Website fans also tried to stage a rebellion during the first season, encouraging viewers to
sign online petitions to protest what was perceived as irregularities in the voting process. Again,
the result of their activity was an increase in ratings, for in both the case of the housemates and
the viewers, their attempts at asserting control were, in effect, when “they were working most
effectively to maximize the value of the show for its producers” (2000, 168).

Since the publication of Andrejevic’s book, Endemol has introduced *Big Brother Second
Life*, a virtual version of the show in which contestants compete to win a virtual island. Endemol
Netherlands managing director, Paul Romer, said that *Second Life* “represents a fantastic
opportunity to amass knowledge of the virtual world. In the future, we will use this experience to
develop specific content for online communities.” *Second Life* has already attracted sponsors
such as Toyota and Reuters (BBC News 2006). The site claims that *Second Life* is “your world,
your imagination,” a digital world “imagined, created, and owned by its residents.” The day
Andrejevic imagines of mass customization may not be far off.

**American Idol: The American Dream**

If *Big Brother* was one of the first of the reality genre to push interactivity to a new level,
it was soon followed by *Idol*. The format for *American Idol* was created by British music and
television producer Simon Fuller. The first version of the format, *Pop Idol*, debuted in the United
Kingdom on October 5, 2001. The success of the program in England led Fuller, who founded the media company 19 Entertainment in 1985, to try to market the format in the United States. After being turned down by several networks, Fox first aired Idol as a summer replacement in June of 2002. As in Britain, the format proved a success with the final episode attracting over twenty-one million viewers that September. Following the initial success, Fox scheduled a second season to air in January of 2003 and has continued to broadcast Idol each January since. Unlike most series, whose ratings are likely to see a dip by their sixth season, American Idol opened its 2007 two-hour premiere on Tuesday, January 16 with an audience of 37.3 million and attracted 36.9 million viewers the following night for a second two-hour special, a seventeen percent increase over the 2006 season (MSNBC.com 2007). News Corp, Fox Network’s parent company, depends on Idol to win the ratings war; usually falling behind the three major networks during the first part of the television season, Idol has helped push Fox into first place for the last three seasons.

The premise, or format, of Idol is a simple one. It is not unlike early TV talent shows such as Arthur Godfrey’s Talent Scouts that aired in the US in the 1950s. However, Idol operates on a much larger scale. The Idol format has been sold to thirty-nine countries which either produce their own program or have it produced. In addition to the UK and the US, countries as diverse as Armenia, Iceland, Kazakhstan, and Viet Nam have their own version of Idol. Additionally, American Idol aired in over one hundred countries as of 2006. The Idol format involves a series of auditions which narrow down contestants to a certain number. Once these

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5 In addition to sanctioned versions of Idol, there are several spin-offs. Ethiopian Idol copies the format and is being pursued by Fremantle, which wants a per episode fee. Other talent contest type shows have sprung up globally, such as “America’s Got Talent” in the US.
auditions are complete, contestants compete to win viewer votes. In the US, initial auditions are
held in major US cities. In 2006 in Seattle alone, 9000 wannabes showed up for the audition,
with 100,000 auditioning nationwide for the 2007 season. Auditions involve several steps.
Contestants first appear before pre-selection panels, singing a capella for fifteen seconds. Those
who show promise, positive or negative, pass on to the next level, to be judged by the program’s
producers, who again narrow the field by selecting both those that have some discernable talent
as well as those that are bad or outrageous enough to create dramatic interest. Finally, the
remaining contestants audition before the judges we all know, Simon Cowell, Randy Jackson,
and Paula Abdul. Of the thousands that audition less than two hundred make it past this step and go on to the Hollywood auditions.
Once in Hollywood the judges continue to make cuts until the field is narrowed down to a
certain number of finalists, which, since season four, has been set at twenty-four, half male and
half female, and again only portions of this round are aired. It is only at this point, during the
semi-finals, that viewers are asked to participate, being encouraged to call in or text their vote.
Contestants continue to compete based on gender until contestants are narrowed to the top
twelve, with both a male and female going home each week. During both the semi-finals and
finals rounds, Idol airs on two nights with the first night showcasing the contestants and the
second night a results night. The final twelve compete over the next eleven weeks until only one
contestant remains, the American Idol. Idol appears to exemplify all that is cited as
democratizing culture; that is, a large number of “common folk” audition to be on the show,

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6 Simon Cowell is an executive with BMG music. Randy Jackson has worked as a musician, songwriter,
producer, and executive vice-president of artists and repertoire at Columbia Records as well as heading up the A&R
department at MCA. Paula Abdul is a multi-platinum selling pop star who has won awards for her choreography.
viewers vote for their favorites and thus can be seen as selecting America’s idol, and fans visit both the official and unofficial web sites where they may interact with other fans, voice opinions, or buy merchandise. However, as the Frankfurt School insisted, this “democratization” must be seen within a broader context, that is situated within contemporary consumer capitalism. Hence, any analysis of Idol should be located within a recognition of its position within the globalization of media conglomerates, and its utilization of participation should be considered within the need for the culture industry to drive profits. Situating the show thusly allows us to ask important questions about what we mean by democracy and the significance of audience participation. It also allows us to consider how Idol stages the complete commodification of culture in which everything, including the performing artists themselves, are nothing more than brand extensions.

Idol, like Big Brother and other reality formats, exemplifies the process of glocalization, in which globalized commodities are adapted to specific localities or cultures. A major beneficiary of the global success of Idol has been Simon Fuller, Idol’s creator, who sold his company, 19 Entertainment to Robert F. X. Sillerman, CEO and major chairholder of CKX Inc., for approximately 210 million in 2005, making 19 a wholly-owned subsidiary. Fuller remained as CEO of 19 Entertainment, a global promoter of musical entertainment, or “entertainment brands.” Sillerman and Fuller have recently made a 1.3 billion dollar bid to take CKX private. 19 Entertainment contributed seventy-two percent of the revenue of CKX in 2006, primarily through its rights to Idol. Fuller teamed with one of the largest international television production companies and creators of program brands, FremantleMedia, a subsidiary of

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7 19 Entertainment also manages Annie Lennox, David Beckham, and his wife, former Spice Girl, Victoria Beckham. CKX also owns Elvis Presley Enterprises which includes the use of the name and image of Elvis, operation of Graceland, and revenue from his films.
Bertelsmann AG, in the production of the *Idol* format. Fremantle, which owns production facilities in forty countries, acts as producer for the *Idol* series in those countries where it has facilities, while acting as a co-producer to local companies elsewhere. Fremantle retains the right to sell the format and finished program when it acts as co-producer, while making its own merchandising, sponsorship, and telephone deals in those countries where it acts as producer. Fuller’s company retains the rights to the winners; he can either choose to manage the winners himself or opt to appoint local management (Turner 2007). While the format for *Idol* is similar worldwide, the program is adapted to be accommodative to local cultures. For example, in both the Pan Arab and Malaysian versions male and female competitors are kept apart rather than housed together. And, most significantly, the productions feature local talent, and national celebrities as hosts and judges. *Idol’s* brand name also encompasses a glocal approach; the word “idol” has a global significance and meaning. However, *Idol* localizes its brand by being adaptable and customizing the brand to reflect the locality; for example there is *Hrvatski Idol* (Croatia), *Indonesian Idol, Vietnam Idol* and *Idolos Brazil* and *Portugal.* 8 Fremantle’s distribution arm is also responsible for distributing *American Idol* internationally, bringing in an estimated one billion a year. BMG, which, like Fremantle is owned by Bertelsmann AG, is a global recorded music venture, and is also linked to the *Idol* phenomena. 9 *Idol* judge Simon Cowell is an executive at BMG overseeing scouting and development of new artists. All *Idol* winners, as well as runner-ups that Fremantle elects to retain, are distributed by various BMG labels in an agreement with 19 Recordings Unlimited, Fuller’s label. This includes releases from

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8 Some versions of *Idol* are regional, rather than country specific. The Pan Arab version is an example, in which contestants from all Arab countries compete.

9 BMG is now Sony BMG after completing a 50-50 ownership deal in 2004.
the various versions of Idol across the globe.

Idol introduced a level of participation that in many ways exceeded previous reality TV offerings. However, to see this participation as a democratization of culture or television itself is to suggest a romantic view of consumer agency and to show the level of disconnect within a cultural studies whose focus has tended to be the site of consumption, divorced from the practice of production. As Thomas Frank has argued, cultural studies has failed to engage with marketing literature, much of which sounds strikingly similar to the celebratory work on audience agency and consumer choice (2000). Critical Theory allows us to situate audience participation differently and to throw suspicion upon claims of democratization. Participation itself must be thought critically; there must not be an assumption that participation is automatically a good or socially and politically progressive. First, Adorno and Horkheimer’s discussion of the myth of success and chance can open an avenue for understanding the attraction of reality programming, especially American Idol. Second, their work on alienation sheds light on the desire to participate and be ‘seen.’ Last, the Frankfurt School argued that culture and advertising were merging; Idol stages the commodification of culture in which culture and advertising are one. The active participation of both contestants and audience serve as free labor, providing information on consumer preferences as well as shaping consumer behavior.

Producers and media alike have claimed that the phenomenal success of American Idol and Idol worldwide can be attributed, at least in part, to the attraction of what FremantleMedia executive producer Ken Warwick refers to as “the rags-to-riches story, which everyone loves,” a story that appeals everywhere. Warwick claims that American Idol is “a program about finding the American dream . . . And people believe we are helping find it” (in Garrity 2000). Keith
Hindle, marketing VP for Fremantle, even suggests that the Dream image is considered in marketing choices, stating in an interview with *TV Guide*, that “the brand is very family friendly – the American Dream – and we avoid anything that’s a bit too risque, or a bit too close to the sex, drugs and rock-and-roll side of music” (in Battaglio 2007). Similarly, the media has referred to *American Idol* as “a televised version of the American Dream” (Dehnart 2005), an “archetypal American Dream factory (Kingston 2007) and “the ‘American’ way” (Garrity 2007). Such references, of course, point to the changing nature of the American dream.

While the idea of the American dream has never been consistent and has meant different things to different groups, it has, arguably, embodied a belief that hard work and determination would lead to a level of prosperity. The American dream was tied to bettering one’s own life and providing a better future for one’s children, and a better community. Tied to a belief in opportunity available to all, and linked to a belief in meritocracy, the *idea* of the American dream has inspired hope throughout the nation’s history. The darker side of the American dream is what the Frankfurt School addressed as “the myth of success.” In their essay, “The Culture Industry” Adorno and Horkheimer argue that the masses cling to a belief in “the myth of success,” that is, that everyone has the opportunity to succeed, an ideology which enslaves them and keeps them in submission to the capitalist system of production (2002, 106). Recognizing the changing needs of capitalist reproduction, they contend that the ideology must also change. Thus, as the masses recognized that their efforts alone were not a guarantor of success, the conception of the path to success through adversity and effort was “increasingly replaced by the prize.” Success is a matter of luck and chance in which there are winners and losers (2002, 116-117). The *American Idol* version of the American dream stages this shift in conception. It is a
short-cut version of the American dream in which chance and luck, rather than hard work or native talent, is seen as the ticket to success and fame. Set against a background of growing economic inequality over the last several decades, it is not surprising that there has been a loss of faith in those parts of the American dream which emphasized hard work and subsequent reward. In lieu of hard work, chance and luck keep a dream of success alive; state lotteries, whose growth and popularity have paralleled the increasing disparity, promise instant wealth and gratification, appealing to a demographic least likely to have a share of the wealth. Reality TV, like the lottery, holds out the promise of winning, the promise that anyone can succeed, anyone can be a star.

While deploying the promise of equality on the one hand, reality TV denies it on the other. After all, there can only be one top chef, top model, top designer, apprentice or American idol. Hosts and judges make a point of reminding us that there can only be one winner. In programs such as America’s Next Top Model and Top Chef in which contestants are evaluated on a given series of tasks, judges inform contestants that the decision was a hard one, but someone has to go home. Losing is promoted as a lesson, another part of the American dream. Contestants vow to keep trying – they may not have won the prize here but another prize is waiting somewhere. On programs with a Survivor type format losing contestants echo these sentiments, expressing how much they have learned from the experience. Idol contestants know the game, that only one will be named an Idol. Semi-finalists sing a departing song when they learn America has voted them off.

While Adorno and Horkheimer’s discussion of the lucky starlet referred to film, it

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10 In Ohio the state lottery has a televised game show called Make Me Famous, Make Me Rich.
nonetheless seems particularly appropriate in a discussion of *American Idol*

Fortune will not smile on all – just on the one who draws the winning ticket or, rather, the one designated to do so by a higher power – usually the entertainment industry itself, which presents itself as ceaselessly in search of talent. Those discovered by the talent scouts and then built up by the studios are ideal types . . . The female starlet is supposed to symbolize the secretary, though in a way which makes her seem predestined, unlike the real secretary, to wear the flowing evening gown. Thus she apprises the female spectator not only of the possibility that she, too, might appear on the screen but still more insistently of the distance between them. Only one can draw the winning lot, only one is prominent. (2002, 116)

In *American Idol* the winner is, of course, the one who draws the most votes, for America gets to choose. There is the appearance of chance and luck, but as Adorno and Horkheimer argued, chance and planning become identical, with chance providing an alibi for the planners and lending a sense of spontaneity and authenticity (2002, 117). In truth, the format was developed by Fuller as a vehicle for recruiting new talent and giving it a test drive. According to Fuller his “whole motivation behind creating *Idol* was, ‘How can I break artists without having to rely on radio?’” (in Garrity 2007). Of the 100,000 who initially attend auditions only a fraction ever have the opportunity to progress to the Hollywood auditions. Despite all the touting about “America’s choice,” voting is restricted to the twenty-four semifinalists selected by the producers and judges, all of whom are required to sign a contract with 19 Entertainment. Finalists images are honed and “made-over.” The distance is created. They may have been a waitress, but something set them apart.

What drives the thousands who audition for *Idol*? Unlike other reality programs where we never see applicants, *Idol* offers the chance to be seen, the possibility of five seconds of fame for those who never make it to Hollywood, far less the finals. Auditioners are well aware that appearing extreme might mean a chance not of becoming *the* idol, but of catching the eye of a
camera man. Outrageous costuming, obscene gestures, bleeped expletives, or an over-the-top audition all promise the opportunity to be seen by millions, to promote and advertise one’s self. I want to suggest that this commodification of the self and the desire to be seen be considered as symptomatic of the deepening of alienation, in which our lived experiences, against the backdrop of a digital economy, are increasingly mediated. The Frankfurt School extended the idea of alienation as conceived by Marx. Marx argued that under industrial capitalism men had become estranged from the products of their labor, that their own activity had become alien and that they were thus alienated from themselves and others. Critical theorists argued that under late capitalism, and with the fusion of political economy and culture, alienation extended to the realms of leisure and consumption. Despite material abundance, we are caught up in a cycle of consumption of commodities that have no value or meaning in themselves (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002). Marcuse argues that alienation had become deeply internalized within the emotional and libidinal depths of being, and that “individuals identify with the existence which is imposed upon them and have it in their own development and satisfaction” such that the “subject is swallowed up by its alienated existence” (1966, 11).

Participation, seen as the desire for reality TV celebrity, suggests a need for a more critical interpretation of the concept of participation itself. As Philo and Miller have argued the desire to publicize the self is not an innocent one, but rather embedded in the relations of the market:

“A key value [of the market] is exactly the obsession with fame and interpersonal success . . . We can see this by looking at some examples from contemporary television culture. The desire to be ‘seen’ is central in a society obsessed with fame and glamour . . . It produces the widespread desire to work in television (or films) or simply to be seen on television. To attract attention, to be the focus of other people’s gaze, is a mark of
success and a form of power. In a media-saturated society, some will do anything to get on television, even if it means being humiliated. Thus in contemporary television, people who were once merely members of the audience appear as ‘guests’ on shows where they are encouraged to eat worms or are paraded merely because they are ugly . . . This is not an ‘a-political’ process, but is an exact consequence of political and economic arrangements.” (2001 46-47)

It is not insignificant that the desire to make one’s self seen colludes with the desires of the market. Idol benefits in the form of free labor. Contestants not only pay their own way to audition for Idol, including travel, hotels, food, and parking, but also sign over the rights for the use of their image. Producers reserve the right to not only “disqualify and/or exclude” at their sole discretion, “any individual from any of the auditions for any reason or no reason at all,” they also “reserve the right to audition people out of order of their place in line” allowing them to easily pull out those “worst of the worst” contestants. All contestants are allowed to bring one friend or family member to the audition. Both must sign a release giving FremantleMedia and 19 Entertainment the right to use:

The recording of your and their performance, appearance, name, voice, singing voice, likeness and musical or sound effects produced by you and/or them for use in connection with any television program, motion picture or the internet for all purposes (including advertising, marketing, promotion, merchandising and the exploitation of any and all ancillary and subsidiary rights), as the same may be edited, in all media now known or hereafter created, throughout the universe, in perpetuity for no compensation. (americanidol.com)

While waiting in line crowds are encouraged to sing songs suggested by staff, or repeat phrases such as “I’m the next American Idol” while cameras roll, capturing shots that will be used during the first few weeks of the show and in advertising promotions. Turning away talented

11 Internet sites such as MySpace, now owned by Rupert Murdoch’s NewsCorp and YouTube, now owned by Google can also be explored as spaces where consumers provide free labor for marketing of brands.
performers, producers capitalize on some of the worst auditions, which contribute to high ratings, during the first several weeks each season, as judges poke fun at the contestants. For example, during the 2007 season, Seattle contestants Jonathan Jayne and Kenneth Briggs were singled out by Cowell whose comments about Jayne’s weight and Briggs “jungle creature” appearance created a media stir – but did not deter viewers.¹² The Seattle auditions, dubbed by judges and media alike as some of the worst in Idol history, were a minefield for producers, leaving Nigel Lythgoe, an executive producer with 19, to claim season 6 would offer “some of the worst we’ve ever had” (Keveny 2006). Fremantle and 19 have also profited from the production of “The Worst of American Idol” DVD’s. Thus, while these contestants suffer humiliation at the hands of the judges, their participation provides free labor benefitting the Idol brand and high ratings.

The concept of alienation might also be useful in understanding the desire to interact with reality programming. Given the rhetoric of choice and democratization that accompanies reality TV it is not surprising that a New York Times article suggested, “Idol may strike some of its fans as more genuinely democratic than the real democratic process” (Stanley, 2006). The compensatory promise of reality TV is the equation of market choice with democracy.

Lastly, Idol stages the merger of advertising and culture. Thus, participation must be viewed in light of its relationship to branding and brand extension. The critical theorists argued that culture had become integrated into the commodity system, in which exchange value replaces

¹² Some contestants, such as Jayne and Briggs, have acquired the sought after fame. Jayne and Briggs were invited to appear on morning talk shows, the TV Guide channel, and radio shows following their appearance. William Hung, was offered a record deal, commercials, and a film despite his display of a total lack of talent during his Season 3 audition.
use value. Adorno and Horkheimer argue that while culture was never “pure,” there had, nonetheless been a shift under industrial capitalism. As Adorno wrote, “Cultural entities typical of the culture industry are no longer also commodities, they are commodities through and through. This quantitative shift is so great that it calls forth entirely new phenomena. . . The culture industry turns into public relations . . advertisements produced for the world, so that each product of the culture industry becomes its own advertisement” (2000, 233). Thus, Horkheimer and Adorno argued that with the blurring of the boundaries between culture and advertising not only had culture become a vehicle for the promotion of commodities through advertising, cultural products themselves had become little more than advertisements, “every close-up of a film actress an advert for her name, every hit song a plug for its tune.” The “factory-like” conditions of the production of culture “predisposes it to advertising” and “lends itself to purposes outside the work” (2002, 132-133). Idol stages the commodification of culture; it exposes the process of constructing celebrity as commodity or brand. Not only does it provide a vehicle for advertising, Idol takes the integration of advertising to new levels. Participation for Idol is not about democratization; it is about product engagement. Idol acts as advertisement and market researcher.

Given its ratings it is not surprising that Idol spots demand some of the highest prices in the industry – or that sponsors line up at their door – enriching the coffers of Fox. Idol now has the highest ad rates of any program with the exception of the SuperBowl, with Ad Age pricing a 30-second spot on the Tuesday night show for Season 6 at $594,000 and the Wednesday results show at $620,00 (Atkinson 2006). The price for an ad during the Season 5 finale went for 1.3 million. Reality TV is also leading the move toward integrated product placement with Idol
leading the move. Its three core sponsors, Coke, Ford, and Cingular, pay 30 million each to be fully integrated into the show. During the 2006 season the core sponsors appeared 4086 times for a total of 446 minutes, a twelve percent increase over the previous season (MSNBC.com 2007).13 Idol recognizes the success of its model of interactivity and is pushing that model beyond its own voting process – to encourage consumers to engage with its advertised products and merchandising efforts.

Cingular, now AT&T, has been a major beneficiary of the Idol model of participation as viewers have a choice of voting by calling free numbers, often with a high number of busy signals, or texting their vote – if they are AT&T customers. According to Keith Hindle, VP of Integrated Marketing and Interactivity for Fremantle Media (that says it all doesn’t it?), “the top line about everything this season is the desire for interactivity. We are trying to kick-start that across all elements of the show. Last season Idol attracted 500 million votes, 65 million text messages. That’s a ridiculous amount of interactivity. We are taking that concept that people want to participate and are strengthening that into other things” (in Atkinson 2007).

Andrejevic has argued that the digital enclosure’s promise of interactivity via the internet and other technologies is a thinly masked veil of surveillance which allows producers to monitor and exploit consumer desire in the interests of flexible capitalism and mass customization. Thus participation can be seen as consumers providing free labor in the form of market research (2004). Participation can also be seen as shaping consumer behavior. According to Brian Levin, writing for Wireless Business Technology, Idol “Provided an ideal environment to introduce text

13 Reality programming isn’t alone in pushing the integrated advertising model. The summer 2007 release of Paramount’s film, Transformers, is seen as an extreme example of integrated advertising in which GM brand vehicles are the actual stars of the film; the film is based on Hasbro toys.
voting to this country,” which lagged behind Europe and Japan where mobile technology had already taken hold. *Idol* taught people how to text – it was now up to the wireless industry and media companies to “continue to exploit” the opportunities available; “mass media content must be utilized to get consumers to change their behavior, and interact using their phones.”

MobileTracker, another industry newsletter points to *Idol’s* success in converting participants to texting. In 2004 they reported that 13.5 million SMS votes were cast, up from 7.5 million the previous season. They also reported that statistics from AT&T indicated that over forty percent had not sent a text message before – at least not using the AT&T network. Text messaging increased seven hundred percent between the beginning of voting and the final episode (2004). The following season text voting increased to 41 million and by the 2006 season 64.5 million votes were cast through text messaging – for which “standard text messaging rates apply” of ninety-nine cents – unless you have a package rate. Cingular, which has exclusive rights for text voting, also offers their customers other special features and ways to interact and allow fans to feel “more personally connected to their favorite Idols,” such as the *Idol* wireless fan club and text chats, trivia, special ringtones, the ability to download the *Idol* icon and songs (Cingular Media Room 2005). In 2006 Cingular teamed with InfoSpace to offer Live Idol Ringtones, allowing customers to download contestant performances within hours at $2.49 a song. Cingular can track the number of downloads and thus monitor the success of its promotions. *Idol’s* successful use of text messaging has changed behavior; texting is not only used far more broadly for everyday communication, a broad spectrum of television genres now encourages viewers to participate by texting their ideas or votes. *Entertainment Tonight* encouraged viewers to text message their opinion on whether or not they wanted to see a “kinder, gentler” *American Idol*
after Cowell’s remarks about Briggs and other contestants. Dramatic series ask viewers to text “who done it.” *Top Chef* won’t allow you to vote on a winner but will let you text a vote on which contestant is the biggest drama queen. Standard text message rates apply; consumers are learning to pay to speak.

*Idol*’s other primary sponsors are also set to capitalize on the desire of consumers to participate. According to Hindle “In a promotion sponsored by Coca-Cola, we’ll be letting viewers submit questions that may get asked in the show itself. . . . the most interesting or entertaining questions will get asked on stage. [The prize] is the joy of having your question asked [being ‘seen’]. But there will be a prize for something we’ll do with Ford. As you know the kids do a music video that’s sponsored by Ford. We will have a competition where people will answer trivia questions . . . to win the chance to get in that video themselves” (in Battaglio 2007). Additionally, a Coca-Cola press release noted that “beyond in-show advertising, Coca-Cola once again has a fully integrated program designed to bring fans closer to the *American Idol* experience” (2007). Fans can visit the *Idol* website and submit new designs for the judges’ Coke cups. The winning design would appear later in the 2007 season; during the competition contestants could spend time online in the Red Room – the Coke Rewards room. The Coke contest exemplifies a form of participation in which consumers are encouraged to engage and identify with a product as well as provide free labor in exchange for being seen.

In addition to on-air sponsors, *Idol* has also garnered off-air promotions which offer brands a cheaper way to tie their products to *Idol* and benefit Fremantle and 19. According to Hindle, Fremantle is “extending the interaction people can have during the show and off-air around the show. We’re trying to extend the life of the brand so it becomes a year round
property. The brand has matured to a level where we can bring on national sponsors that are not integrated into the show itself but associate with the show in marketing and promotions during the year off-air” (in Lentini 2007). For example, off-air sponsor Oscar Mayer will have a promotion in which people compete to sing their jingle “Sing the Jingle, Be a Star” – again benefitting from (free) consumer-created content in lieu of high-priced advertising.\(^{14}\)

One of the most important aspects of branding is the extension of the Idol brand itself. As the critical school theorists argued, culture can no longer be distinguished from advertising; *Idol* is about salesmanship. As Cecile Frot-Coutaz, CEO of Fremantle North America has said the “*Idol* franchise is part of a merchandising empire” and the goal is “to go out and really turn this into a bigger brand than just a tv show” (CNN.com 2007). The vision is a large one, in which the *Idol* brand becomes identified with a lifestyle, and merchandising can extend well beyond the life of the show. Olivier Gers, General Manager for FremantleMedia Licensing Worldwide says “We have created a unique licensing business that allows us to extend *American Idol* and all of our brands across a broad range of platforms and localize our efforts” (in Grala 2007). Fremantle and 19 share ownership of the *Idol* brand, controlling the merchandising rights globally. For Hindle an important aspect of brand extension is interactivity; “Again it’s all these different ways to interact, even with the products” (in Battaglio 2007). To date the *Idol* experience has been extended to games, food, clothing, and toys. Off-air sponsor, Nestles, produced 70 million candy bars with images of contestants. Dreyer’s, another off-air sponsor, created new flavors with names such as “Drumstick Diva.” The Dreyer’s website allows you to click on a flavor and

\(^{14}\) Super Bowl sponsors also took advantage of consumer labor in 2007. Doritos, GM, and the NFL all sponsored contests. As the Washington Post reported, “For advertisers consumer created content is a cost savings bonanza” (Ahrens 2007).
listen to music. There is also a karaoke game for PlayStation, and a monopoly game. According to Hindle, “It’s kind of a badge of having made it as a brand when you get your own Monopoly board” (in Battaglio 2007). The brand has also been extended to fragrances, jewelry, and other accessories. Judges such as Abdul have launched their own product lines and Paula launched her own reality show, *Hey, Paula* on Bravo in the summer of 2007. David Luner, senior VP of Interactive and Consumer Products for Fremantle said one of his current goals is to “explore more merchandising extensions in the interactive and role-play categories” (in Grala 2007). Fashion is also seen as offering opportunities, an extension that interests Fuller; fashion is seen as having a link to the show – transforming us all into divas.

*Idol* hasn’t overlooked the younger set either. Mattel produced an *Idol* Barbie and her friends. *Idol* has also has also extended its brand with a performing arts *Idol* Camp. The camp, for children between the ages of twelve and fifteen, offers classes in performance, charging seven hundred students $2900 for a ten-day camp experience.

The *Idol* website provides another opportunity for brand extension. In addition to watching recaps, fans can purchase music downloads, merchandise such as tee shirts and other accessories. You can even get the *Idol* look; website users can get fashion and beauty tips from stylists so they can wear the same hair and make-up as their favorite contestant. A licensing partner, Star Style, also lets you buy the same outfits worn by finalists. Of course, the website also offers a “My *Idol*” space where fans can blog, chat with friends, and create a user profile, all of which provides consumer feedback. Fans can also extend their interactive experience through American-Idol Messenger.com, which allows fans to connect via instant messaging. A press release from Meca Communications, that partnered with Fremantle, claims that the service
“offers an additional medium for Fremantle to maximize the value of American Idol’s interactive marketing and promotional offerings . . . [and provides] a highly targeted promotional tool . . . Experience Messenger creates a fully tethered consumer experience, keeping users actively involved in a brand’s content, images and messages . . . continuing their interaction with the American Idol brand during the many days and hours when the show is not on the air” (Meca.com 2005). Messenger is sold to fans in the language of opportunity; the opportunity to interact and be part of an Idol community, to feel more involved in the program. However, all this interactivity again brings up the issue of the need for a more critical view of participation and its significance. Does audience participation really mean viewers participate in the process of production in any meaningful way? Or is participation only enabling the monitoring of consumer viewing and consumption habits in the age of mass-customization and flexible capitalism?

Finally, one of the most important brand extensions for Idol are the performers themselves. Once judges have selected the twenty-four semifinalists, host Ryan Seacrest invokes the audience to participate in choosing America’s Idol, stating “The judges’ job is over. Now you are in control.” When winners and losers are announced each week Seacrest approaches the waiting contestants, announcing, “America has voted” and telling candidates if they are staying or going home. Much is made of the voting process, and how viewers “have a real way of participating, as opposed to being armchair athletes” (CNN.com 2007). Jason Turner, director of interactive at Fremantle claims, “the magic behind this is that fans are involved in the show. They are not a passive audience. The fans choose the ending of the show, which is why it is a success year after year. They are the show” (in Johannes 2005). The media focuses on the large
number of votes, comparing voting for an Idol to voting for a president, a skewed comparison considering Idol encourages fans to vote more than once. There have been criticisms of the voting process; for example, the large number of busy signals fans receive when phone voting suggests that many votes are dropped and in close contests the results may be skewed. DialIdol, an independently created downloadable software will actually dial for you, allowing you to vote for as many contestants as you want as many times as you want. It also logs the number of busy signals received when it dials, and records suggest that during finals voting for 2006 winner Taylor Hicks lines were busy eighty-two percent of the time. While it has been suggested that the show allow fans to vote online, as they do in some other countries, producers have been reluctant to adapt that approach, suggesting online voting wasn’t safe enough and was too easily hacked. However, their agreement with Cingular is the more likely reason. Criticism has also been leveled against Fox’s failure to disclose the actual number of votes received. Viewers never know how close votes were. Despite these criticisms it is true that viewers select the Idol, a process that keeps viewers invested in the show. However, it is important that this not be perceived as democratizing access to the process of production. As Fuller stated, his inspiration for Idol was finding a way to test drive performers. We are not co-producers. It is important to differentiate between participation as actual power sharing and participation designed to achieve pre-determined goals – such as record sales. American Idol attempts to obscure this difference. The voting process provides 19 with a nationwide marketing research tool in which voters provide free labor telling them which products (performers) they are most likely to buy.

Because 19 retains an option to sign all twenty-four semifinalists it can also sign any of the contestants that it sees as sellable. A total of eight contestants were signed from Season 5 and
Contestants on *Idol* and most reality shows are sequestered for the duration of the competition. They are not allowed to make phone contact with the outside, watch television, or use the internet. That is why a phone call is often given as a reward on programs such as *Survivor*.

Fourth-place winner Chris Daughtry is outselling winner Taylor Hicks, all suggesting that the voting public may not be all that important. The contracts give 19 an option on recording rights, and also include managing and merchandising rights. The performers play an important role in extending the *Idol* brand. The top finalists are required by contract to participate in the *Idol* Tour, for relatively small fees, while *Idol* Tour 5 earned 14.6 million as of August 2006. A producer of the “The brand ... is as much of a star to the consumer when they spend their disposable income as the entertainment on stage” (in Garrity 2007). Contestants are also required to appear in commercials for free, such as those for Ford. The artists signed by 19, including the “idol,” receive a one record album deal from 19 and are committed for a period of three years. While the contract is kept secret, and it is reported that contestants who reveal the terms of the contract can be fined five million dollars, the terms of the contract are reported to be stingy and exploitive, with Fuller taking as much as 50% rather than the usual cut.\(^{15}\)

In essence, *Idol* performers must also agree to turn over their careers to 19. Contestants are represented as a group by one attorney, chosen by the show, in their negotiations. Once signed, 19 takes on the role of packaging the performers, manipulating their image and constructing them as brands in their own right. They also reserve the option to renew. *Idol* indeed stages the complete commodification of culture; 19 has even trademarked “the names ‘Ruben Studdard’ and ‘Fantasia Barrino’ for commercial use, according to US Patent and Trademark Office filings” (Lieberman 2005). While these performers may become names in their own right, it is doubtful they will ever lose the link to *Idol*.

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\(^{15}\) Contestants on *Idol* and most reality shows are sequestered for the duration of the competition. They are not allowed to make phone contact with the outside, watch television, or use the internet. That is why a phone call is often given as a reward on programs such as *Survivor*. 
As Andrejevic has argued, the equation between interactivity and participation is not a simple one. Nor is the equation with democracy; “In an era characterized by the democratization of access to publicity as public relations, a critique of the notion of participation becomes central . . . the coming years will highlight the necessity of clarifying what counts as democratic – as distinguished from transactional - participation.” Celebratory accounts of participation which equate rather than distinguish between the two, equating “interactivity with democratic participation” run the risk of conceiving of the “free market as freedom” and “democracy as capitalism” (2004, 218-219). If cultural studies intention is to be more than a cheerleader for the status quo that celebrates participation as an inherent good, the work of the critical theorists offers a place to start – or to return to.
CHAPTER FIVE

WHEN THE GOING GETS TOUGH THE TOUGHS GO SHOPPING:
CONSUMPTION AS POLITICS

Shopping is the crisis of consumerism: it is where the art and tricks of the weak can inflict the most damage on, and exert the most power over, the strategic interests of the powerful. The shopping mall that is seen as the terrain of guerrilla warfare looks quite different from the one constructed by the metaphor of religion.

– John Fiske 1989

New Times is a fraud, a counterfeit, a humbug. It palms off Thatcherite values as socialist, shores up the Thatcherite market with the pretended politics of choice, fits out the Thatcherite individual with progressive consumerism, makes consumption itself the stuff of politics. New Times is a mirror image of Thatcherism passing for socialism. New Times is Thatcherism in drag.

– A. Sivanandian 1989

The desire to locate agency in cultural studies has not only influenced work on media, but also other forms of consumption. In lieu of a stance that viewed the commodification of culture in a negative light and was critical of consumption, cultural studies moved toward a position that saw commodities in a positive light. This work sought out examples of how people utilize commodities in resistant ways, arguing that commodities themselves could be used subversively. They also argued that the plethora of consumer choices available within flexible capitalism offered consumers opportunities to creatively construct identities at the very moment traditional forms of identification such as family, church, and even class and race, were receding in significance. Thus, in much of this work consumption is not problematized; rather, consumption is viewed as providing a space for resistance to the dominant or parental culture and the expression of self. The production process is often masked in this work or ignored entirely in what seems to be an inversion of the Marxist problematic.

These claims took shape against the backdrop of “New Times.” The idea of a “New Times” project was conceived by the editorial board of the journal Marxism Today which
sponsored a seminar in May of 1988. The October issue of the journal was subsequently devoted to exploring the concept; it was argued that by the 1980s capitalist societies were experiencing qualitative change, reflected in the transition from Fordism to post-Fordism. This change was "characterized by diversity, differentiation, and fragmentation, rather than homogeneity, standardization, and the economics of scale which characterized modern mass society" (Hall and Jacques 1990, 11). According to Hall and Martin Jacques, the project sought to make sense not only of economic transitions, but also "to unravel postmodern culture, to understand the new identities and political subjects in society" (1990, 15). The project was also seen as a response to Thatcherism, particularly as Thatcherism defined these changes.

The first part of this chapter is concerned with developing the theoretical backdrop that underlies my argument. I again return briefly to the work of the Frankfurt theorists as well as that of Pierre Bourdieu to argue that commodity culture should be seen in a more critical light than much of the contemporary work of cultural studies suggests. I also turn to the work of John Sanbanmatsu and others to suggest that the position of this line of argument within cultural studies has led to what I see as an expressivist politics more concerned with the individual than with broad structural change. In the second part of the chapter I explore my theoretical claims by examining lifestyle programming. This form of reality television consists of programming which addresses our material lives; that is, the way we cook, decorate our homes, and present ourselves. Lifestyle programming complements arguments within cultural studies with its implication that the correct choice of consumer goods allows us to breach the boundaries of our class position and find success in work and pleasure in life. Transformation takes place not at a social level, but in the transformation of the self. Paradoxically, it is in this suggestion of the
erasure of class through consumption that the ongoing relevance of class stratification is made evident; lifestyle programming foregrounds consumer “taste” as a marker of class position. Lifestyle programming suggests that identity is anchored in consumption - image and identity become one and the same. However, unlike the romantic image of the creative consumer as artist and producer of meanings painted by cultural studies, reality programming suggests that meanings are far more stable and that expressions of self must be constrained; on offer here is a conforming individualism.

**Critical Theory and Bourdieu vs. New Times**

The move toward a more celebratory attitude toward the commodification of life as found in the changing tenor of work within cultural studies as opposed to that of the critical theorists can best be explored by juxtaposing the two positions. As discussed in chapter four, for the critical theorists the commodification of culture worked to reproduce the conditions of capitalism. Horkheimer and Adorno argued that cultural products and advertising were essentially the same, promising satisfaction and fulfillment, but always failing to deliver. Thus, the consumer is always wanting more, shackling “consumers to the big combines.” Moreover, the access to commodities “at bargain prices” is not seen as a democratizing move that erases class structures. According to Horkheimer and Adorno consumers are not passive dupes; they recognize that the commercialization of culture makes it less valuable, for “they are dimly aware that the less something costs, the less it can be a gift to them. The twofold mistrust of traditional culture as ideology mingles with that of industrialized culture as fraud” (2002, 130-131). Most significantly, they argue that the culture industry functions as an escape mechanism; the
pleasures offered by the culture industry serve to curtail any questioning or challenge to the way things are. We are lulled into complacency.

This position is best expressed in Marcuse’s essays “New Forms of Social Control” and “The Closing of the Political Universe” in which he argues that the demand for “rights and liberties” which characterized an earlier stage of industrial society has given way to the development of new needs, such as the need for identification through commodities. These “false needs” serve to reproduce the status quo and contain the critical function that might be directed toward any challenge toward the state. Liberation has been supplanted by “such deceptive liberties as free competition at administered prices, a free press which censors itself, free choice between brands and gadgets.” As Marcuse argues, liberty can also serve as an instrument of domination, for “the range of choice open to the individual is not the decisive factor in determining the degree of human freedom, but what can be chosen and what is chosen by the individual” (1966, 5-7). Unlike the picture of “New Times” painted by Hall, the comfortable life offered by an affluent society can become a trap according to Marcuse, for people can no longer “imagine a qualitatively different universe” as affluence serves to “contain and manipulate subversive imagination” making the status quo palatable, “even unnoticeable” (1966, 24-25).

This is in fact a major premise of One Dimensional Man:

The absorption of ideology into reality does not, however signify the ‘end of ideology.’ On the contrary, in a specific sense advanced industrial culture is more ideological than its predecessor, inasmuch as today the ideology is in the process of production itself. . . . The productive apparatus and the goods and services which it produces ‘sell’ or impose the social system as a whole. . . [they] carry within them prescribed attitudes and habits, certain intellectual and emotional reactions which bind the consumers more or less pleasantly to the producers and, through the latter to the whole. The products indoctrinate and manipulate; they promote a false consciousness which is immune against its falsehood. And as these beneficial products become available to more individuals in more social classes, the indoctrination they carry ceases to be publicity; it becomes a way of
life. It is a good way of life - much better than before - and as a good way of life it militates against qualitative change. Thus emerges a pattern of one-dimensional thought and behavior in which ideas, aspirations, and objectives that, by their content, transcend the established universe of discourse and action are either repelled or reduced to terms of this universe. (1966, 11-12)

While the Frankfurt theorists are broadly portrayed as positioning consumers as dupes, as should now be obvious, I do not accept this reading. The very idea of a “false need” or “false consciousness” sends a shiver down the spine of cultural studies scholars who argue that the concepts are inherently elitist. However, these arguments fail to address how, for example, Marcuse insisted that desire (and pleasure) are socially constructed, that is, learned - desire is historical and social in nature. It is this argument which allows him to go on to argue that the indulgence of desire or pleasure within advanced industrial society serves to enforce domination. Thus, for Marcuse, desire does not stand outside of ideology as cultural studies would seem to have it. In Marcuse’s work, as well as for Horkheimer and Adorno, our needs and desires are shaped, not the least of which is through advertising.

Marcuse’s idea of “prescribed attitudes and habits” resonates with the work of Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu also argued that culture contributes to domination and the reproduction of the social system. Class distinctions are reproduced through our stylistic choices, the commodities we choose, that is, by taste. Taste, however, does not happen in a vacuum, but is structured and “acquired through the lasting experience of social position” or habitus, for it is here that we acquire our “appreciation of practices” and the competencies to perceive classificatory differentiations. For Bourdieu, habitus implies not only “a ‘sense of one’s place’ but also a ‘sense of the place of others.’” Not only does our social positioning structure our taste, we ourselves choose to classify ourselves by selecting goods which are homologous to our own
position within the social space - thus constantly reproducing class differentiation. Habitus thus serves to naturalize our dispositions, our choices and the way we act, making common sense out of internalized experiences and social background. Further, Bourdieu argues that “social space tends to function as a symbolic space, a space of lifestyles and status groups characterized by different lifestyles . . . [that is] differences function as distinctive signs and as signs of distinction, positive or negative” (1995, 328-329). Bourdieu understood the struggle over classification as fundamental to class struggle:

*Symbolic power is a consecration or revelation*, the power to reveal or consecrate things that are already there . . . The power to impose and to inculcate a vision of divisions, that is, the power to make visible and explicit social divisions that are implicit, is political power par excellence. It is the power to make groups, to manipulate the objective structure of society. (1995, 332-333)

In *Distinction* Bourdieu explores more fully how different segments of the petit bourgeois or middle classes are situated in relation to taste and aesthetic judgement. He argues that it is in those segments which most aspire to upward mobility, especially those that originated in the lower middle and working class, that we find “the most developed form of ascetic dispositions and devotions to culture associated with the ambition to pursue by further accumulation of cultural capital a rise made possible by an initial small accumulation.” Bourdieu recognizes that the choice of goods, that is taste, says something about not only who we are, but also who we want to be - or be seen as being. Our clothes, our homes, our food choices all say something about our identity - especially our class position (Bourdieu 1984, 351; Palmer 2004).

The phenomena of bottled water can serve to illustrate the creation of a “false need” by marketers as well as Bourdieu’s argument regarding taste and class. It is an example so obvious as to seem absurd but the drinking of bottled water has become completely “naturalized.”
Despite complaints about the high cost of gasoline Americans spend far more per gallon on bottled water - a product that they can have for next to nothing from their tap. It is a testament to the power of marketing. Drinking bottled water is also about the desire to look hip and the status associated with different brands of bottled water. Marketers have pushed the idea that bottled water is more healthful, pure and pristine, and may even have mysterious benefits not found in tap water. Poland Springs claims to be “the very best for your family,” while Fiji water appeals to those seeking a distinctive taste, “untouched by man” and Special K offers an improvement on mother nature - a “diet” protein water with fifty calories a serving as opposed to none. Aquafina, bottled by Pepsi, and Dasani, bottled by Coca-Cola, make up 24% of bottled water sales in the US; both are tap water which has been run through an additional filter. Water has become a fashion accessory - our choice of bottled water is about branding ourselves - Fiji water, carried by expensive hotels, and Pellegrino, which is sold in a glass bottle instead of plastic - have more cultural cache than Dasani. But bottled water is about more than style, it must also be situated within a global economy in which Americans drink a luxury water from Fiji, while the residents of Fiji do not have safe drinking water. In the US, Perrier pumped 90,000 gallons of water a day in Texas for their Ozarka Springs brand, causing local wells to go dry. And this does not even begin to address the issue of landfill waste or the energy used to bottle and ship water across the globe. My point here is to argue that any celebration of the “pleasure” located in consumption or of how a consumer product is used in the playful construction of identity is extremely limited when it is lifted from any account of the context of production. Unfortunately, this is a direction found in much of the more celebratory work of cultural studies.

While Stuart Hall has at times been critical of overstating consumer freedoms he might,
nonetheless, be seen as contributing to this shift. His arguments in the collection *New Times* can be read as a capitulation in which any alternative to existing market conditions or “new” forms of identity construction through consumption can be imagined or even should be. His stress on pleasure and comfort bring home the argument made by critical theorists that the more comfortable life of an affluent society enables a failure to imagine things differently. Indeed, Hall’s argument here stands in striking contrast to the work of the critical theorists as well as the later work of Bourdieu. In his essay, “The Meaning of New Times,” first published in 1989, Hall first identifies some of the characteristics associated with “new times,” such as changes in the organization of labor and post-Fordist production practices which emphasize product differentiation and more consumer choice; an increased focus on consumption and lifestyle, changes in technology, as well as the process of globalization and the outsourcing of labor. However, the significant point of Hall’s essay seems to be that if this is the way things are we should just lay back and enjoy it.

Is this merely the culture of commodified consumption? Are these necessarily Trivial Pursuits? . . . Yes, much - perhaps even most - of the time. But underlying that have we missed the opening up of the individual to the transforming rhythms and forces of modern *material* life? Have we become bewitched by who, in the short run, reaps the profit from these transactions . . ., and missed the democratization of culture which is also potentially part of their hidden agenda? Can a socialist of the 21st century revive, or even survive, which is wholly cut off from the landscapes of popular pleasures, however contradictory and ‘commodified’ a terrain they represent? (1989, 128-129)

Hall goes on to suggest that “the proliferation of models and styles” available to consumers is mirrored in “wider processes of cultural diversity and differentiation, related to the multiplication of social worlds” each of which has its own “scenes” and “pleasures.” These changes, Hall argues, allow people more “choice and control over everyday life,” and the chance to “play’ with its more expressive dimensions” by offering people “positionalities and
identities,” that is, to “play the game of using things to signify who they are” (1989, 129, 131).

Hall’s argument here again reflects the desire to locate agency as opposed to what is perceived as the passive position of critical theorists as well as Bourdieu. While I have already outlined many of the criticisms made by cultural studies of the Frankfurt School in chapter four, cultural studies has also been critical of the work of Bourdieu. While granting that Bourdieu is a step up from the mass culture approach of Critical Theory, many cultural studies scholars nonetheless find that in his work “‘structure’ appears to unduly constrain ‘agency’” so that consumers “seem rather too passive” (Paul du Gay, et. al. 1997, 102). One problem that is identified in Bourdieu’s work is his use of class as the major factor in his analysis of consumption and social positioning and the ignoring of other differences such as race and gender. Secondly, borrowing from the work of de Certeau, it is argued that Bourdieu conceives of the process of consumption as reproducing class difference because we are what we consume, that is, we become like what those products are seen to signify, rather than appropriating products and making them our own by attaching new and often resistant meanings to them. Thus, it is argued that Bourdieu ignores how products are creatively used in everyday life in ways that break down class divisions and offer the potential for the creation of alternative social identities and differences (du Gay, et.al. 1997, 98-102).

This criticism reflects the theoretical influences that have been instrumental in shaping much of the work on consumption in cultural studies under Hall and later, especially what has been called the “linguistic turn,” that is, the work being done in semiotics, including the work of figures such as Barthes, Kristeva, and Baudrillard (see for example, Fiske 1987, 1989 and Hebdige 1979). While a full discussion of semiotics, the study of signs, would require a book in
itself, I do want to briefly point to how this work has influenced arguments about consumption. I would argue that the effects of the linguistic turn are twofold; first, the focus on signifiers, rather than on what they signified, lifted commodities from their material existence within a system of production and exchange. Thus any interest in production was eclipsed by an interest in a search for pleasure and resistance in the play of signifiers. Second, this play was dependent upon the suggestion that signs are polysemic, that is, that there is no inherent connection between a signifier and the signified, thus allowing room for a multiplicity of meanings and readings and symbolic creativity. This move opened the door to arguments about the uses of commodities as sites of resistance and consumer pleasure.

The work of de Certeau has been instrumental in this move and exemplifies an approach to commodities that emphasizes the use made by consumers rather than production. For de Certeau, everyday practices offer the powerless opportunities for evading and resisting the social order by making use of the resources available to them – those of the very social order they are resisting. De Certeau uses language as a model to make his argument, arguing that language functions as an agent of social control; however, he argues that rather than look at how language functions as rule-enforcing we need to theorize how the weak can appropriate language and use it tactically to make it temporarily their own. De Certeau then goes on to argue that this same approach can be used in theorizing other aspects of cultural practice. Rather than privilege the “productive apparatus,” de Certeau claims we need to focus on consumption, on how consumers use commodities, “the clandestine forms taken by the dispersed, tactical, and make-shift creativity of groups or individuals already caught in the nets of ‘discipline,’” which “pushed to their ideal limits, these procedures and ruses of consumers compose the network of an
antidiscipline” (1984, xiv-xv). De Certeau argues that consumers are “artists” and “producers,” who through their “signifying practices” appropriate the languages available to them to “trace out the ruses of other interests and desires” that can not be wholly contained by the social order. The tactics and ruses used by the weak, such as bricolage, are employed in everyday life, and at least for a moment, destabilize the order imposed by the strong; they cannot escape the dominant order but can adapt and use it toward their own ends and needs (1984, xviii). For de Certeau reading, or consuming, is poaching, or stealing, and the “silent, transgressive, ironic or poetic” (1984, 172) uses and evasions of the common people, hidden from their masters, are viewed as minuscule disruptions in the social order, a type of guerilla warfare or maneuvering within a space they lack the power to challenge on a broader scale – an escape without leaving (1984, xiii). De Certeau’s work can be seen as enabling arguments in cultural studies and elsewhere (Fiske 1989; Gillespie 1995). However the extent that de Certeau’s ideas of poaching and creative reinvention in everyday life can be viewed as liberating or rather, like carnival, only compensatory remains in question.

Much of the earlier work in cultural studies on consumption valorized the use of commodities by subcultural groups (see Chambers 1986; Hebdige 1979; Willis 1978). This work saw consumption as an active process in which subcultural groups could play with what was seen as the polysemic nature of signs, or the meanings attached to commodities. For example, Hebdige cites Barthes argument that mainstream culture defines the way we see the world and that this comes to be seen as natural. But, he argues, subcultures expose this construction:

It is in this sense that subcultures can be said to transgress the laws of ‘man’s second nature’. By repositioning and recontextualizing commodities, by subverting their conventional uses and inventing new ones, the subcultural stylist gives the lie to . . . the ‘false obviousness of everyday practice’. . . . it is through the distinctive rituals of
consumption, through style, that the subculture at once reveals its ‘secret’ identity and communicates its forbidden meanings. It is basically the way in which commodities are used in subculture which mark the subculture off from more orthodox cultural formations. (1979, 102-103)

Bricolage, theft, and appropriation all play a part in these “subversive practices” of semiotic warfare, “one which assigns a central place to the problems of reading” (1979, 105, 119).

This approach to consumption is also evident in the work of Iain Chambers on subcultures, in which he argues that “consumerism was turned into the secret language of style, into imposing your presence on the goods, on the present. The mod subculture proceeded to demonstrate how the objects and contexts of commercial popular culture . . . could be transformed and moulded” (1986, 7).

More recent work suggests that subcultures aren’t the only ones who can employ such tactics; apparently pop stars can too. Much of the celebratory work on Madonna was concerned with her playful, chameleon-like reinventions of herself and her use of commodities in the construction of new identities, as well as her use of commodities, in the form of drag for example, in subverting gender categories (Fiske1989; Kellner1995; Cathy Schwichtenberg 1993). Both Fiske and Schwichtenberg, for example, argue that Madonna’s display of femininity in excess (dragging femininity), is a site of semiotic struggle in which excess spills over, revealing gender as a construction and thereby (it is assumed) works to “undo” it.

Marie Gillespie’s work can also serve as an example of the use of commodities both to signify resistance and in the construction of identity. In her book *Television, Ethnicity, and Cultural Change* (1995), Gillespie claims that she does not set out to:

Celebrate consumer creativity any more than consumer culture itself. *But* (emphasis mine) following de Certeau (1984), it does take the view that consumption, despite its overdetermination by the market and the unequal distribution of access to economic and
cultural capital . . . is not a passive process but an *expressive* (emphasis mine) and productive activity. In de Certeau’s terms, the ‘powerless’ as consumers of representations take some control over their lives by employing ‘tactics’: through ‘the silent, transgressive, ironic or poetic activity of the readers’, the ‘strategies’ of the powerful are resisted. (13)

Gillespie discusses consumer culture, such as fashion and hair style, in relation to Indian teens in the Southall district of London and their desire to identify with British and/or American culture rather than the ethnic culture of their parents. Gillespie also discusses the significance of the consumption of Coca-Cola and McDonald’s food in the lives of teenagers from the Southall district, a primarily Asian residential area, suggesting that eating at McDonalds offered a sense of freedom and choice as well as freedom from the “watchful eye” of parents. According to Gillespie, McDonalds and Coke “represent an alternative. These brands connote, both through the suggestions conveyed by the imagery, songs, and slogans of their ads, . . . an ideal ‘freedom’ which transcends boundaries” (1995, 204). Gillespie goes on to suggest McDonalds and Coke ads inspire teen desire to breach the boundaries of the parental culture, arguing “the responses to these ads invoke a hoped for transcendence of ethnic – and other – difference, in a setting of consumerist freedom, they define an ideal arena, an imaginative space, within which the construction of new identities becomes possible as a real project’(1995, 206). There is little question here of whether or not this “consumer freedom” and the identities that McDonalds and Coke ads might construct are in fact progressive or ultimately might lead to lessened social inequality; rather, there is an assumption that parental cultures are necessarily in need of transgression. Importantly, although Gillespie does argue that consumption has become increasingly important in the constitution of identity, she also recognizes that class differences continue to “shape consumption practices,” and “frame the limits of their creative freedom”
This work has come under criticism and has been accused of fitting neatly with the needs of consumer capitalism and neo-liberal individualism. Frow has criticized de Certeau, arguing that he has a “polar model of domination” in which power flows in a unilateral direction and lacks complexity. He also suggests there is a danger of substituting the experience and desires of the analyst or intellectual for the experience of the “subject of popular or indigenous culture” in de Certeau’s reduction of practices to what might be called an ethnography of semiotic codes (1995, 55, 58-59). As discussed in chapter one, Frow also points to an assumption that somehow the dominated classes have “escaped all hegemonic influence” and have “developed quite separate and autonomous reading practices” (1995, 83) from those of the dominant class, a proposition frequently found in much of the work on consumption, and which grants epistemic privilege to oppressed groups which I would argue leads to a romanticizing of the “people” and their tastes and desires.

Other criticisms have been leveled at the general trend within cultural studies. Judith Williamson claims that:

In recent years, particularly within the field of cultural studies, there has been a growing interest in consumerism not as a regressive . . . but as a progressive trend – for example in studies of fashion and subcultural activities where commodities or styles can be ‘subverted’ into rebellious statements. The extreme form of this is found in the academic idea of ‘postmodernism’ where, because no meanings are fixed and anything can be used to mean anything else, one can claim as radical almost anything provided it is taken out of its original context . . . [there is an ] absence of any sense of a relationship between the spheres of production and consumption.”(1988, 229 )

For Williamson this trend away from any analysis of the relationship between production and consumption occurred at a time when consumption, ideology and the economic base had become increasingly connected (1988, 233). Sivanandan has also criticised the shift and the focus on the
individual, complaining “that, according to the new-timers, is what is exhilarating about New Times: the shift to the subject, the personal, the individual. Everything is in our hands now. We are not determined by ‘impersonal structures’ . . . Because the personal is political. And personal politics is about consumption, desire, pleasure – because we have got choice now. New Times affords us choices, all sorts of choices, of how we dress, eat, make love, choices of style” (1989, 13). As he asks, however, how do these celebrations of choice and consumption raise questions about what we see as democratization, or who sells us the ideas and lifestyles that shape our lives, or popular pleasures? Who benefits? (1989, 14). For Sivanandan the end result is a “shift in focus from economic determinism to cultural determinism, from changing the world to changing the word, from class in and for itself to the individual in and for himself or herself. Use value has ceded to exchange value, need to choice, com-munity to i-dentity.” The self that is glorified in this work is an “inward- looking” self that “finds pride in life-style, exuberance in consumption and commitment in pleasure – and then elevates them all into a politics” (1989, 23), what I argue is an expressivivist and romantic conception of the political.

Similarly, Greg Philo and David Miller argue that much of the work that emphasizes the active and creative role of the consumer in the construction of identity via lifestyle is based on two assumptions; first that “commodities are seen to be ‘chosen’ and second that the meanings attached to those products are also chosen,” an assumption that excludes an examination of both the processes of production and the influences of marketing, what Marcuse would have argued was the construction of needs and desires (2002, 66). Significantly, they argue that the idea that consumers make an ‘active’ choice between products is a “banal proposition.” For, as they say, “it is much less clear that these ‘active’ choices subvert the meanings of the products available.”
And more importantly, what are the bigger questions, “what happens as a result of consumption. What are the outcomes of the alleged active selection, appropriation and subversion of commodities? Are the responses politically progressive or even relatively harmless pleasures?” (2002, 67). In other words, Philo and Miller ask, what are the consequences and outcomes? For as they say, “this multitude of social responses including the growth of consumption and fragmentation of styles does not signify a new type of society. Without understanding this there is little that media studies or social science can offer that is critical of the society we do have” (2001, 47).

I would argue that this capitulation within cultural studies and elsewhere is reflective of what the cultural theorists saw as a failure of imagination and an acceptance of the status quo, in which the possibility for broad structural change is abandoned in lieu of a change in the self. This turn is reflective of an expressivist politics which promotes individual self-expression. Samuel Farber identifies an expressivist politics as one which stresses “subjectivity, structurelessness, and expressiveness” and a “political posture” which glorifies irrationalism, “non-responsive individualism (‘do your own thing’) and a hopelessly ‘romantic’ populism” (Farber 2000, xi). John Sanbanmatsu has linked expressivism with a Romantic sensibility which privileges feeling over reason, an inward turn, an “emphasis on self-transformation” and the “aesthetic project of refashioning and expressing the inner self” (2004, 47). Speech, in the form of the call for an authentic voice, becomes the new praxis, capable of “subverting the hegemonic order and fashioning a new self” (2004, 54). For Sanbanmatsu, the anti-essentialism of poststructuralism found common ground with what might seem an incommensurate conception of politics – the call for an authentic voice – to one of playful expression, the expression of self
through the play of signifying practices and ever-shifting identities. The cost of the expressivist aesthetic has been the enabling of “a qualitative deepening of commodity logics” in which the care and expression of self fits neatly with a global capitalism eager to create and cater to new desires. A second result of expressivism was the failure of the Left to develop a coherent social theory or viable conception of praxis (2004, 49-50).

An expressivist politics can also be seen in Carl Schmitt’s conception of political romanticism. For Schmitt, political romanticism reduced politics to aesthetics, the creative play with words, irony, the transformation of life and self into works of art, objective reality replaced by the “subjectification of life” and the “privatization of experience” (Guy Oakes 1986, xix; Schmitt 1986). Schmitt argued that political romanticism produces no real or practical change; rather it leads to posturing and the satisfaction found in endless conversation and the play of individual imagination. The failure to engage in a practical politics in effect supports the status quo as it poses no real challenge to existing structures.

Kellner’s discussion of the Expressionists and their legacy, which he links to Romanticism and contemporary expressivist politics, echoes the work of Sanbanmatsu and Schmitt. Kellner has argued that the Expressionists were not “consistently anti-capitalist” except in a “‘romantic anti-capitalism’” way and may have even contributed to advanced capitalism with “their stress on feeling and the unfolding of individuality.” The focus on individualized self-expression paved the way for advanced consumer capitalism, “which required instant gratification, craving for the new, eroticized youth-consumer culture, and the ‘rootless freedom’ of movement and choice.” With its emphasis on self, the movement lacked a vision of inter-subjectivity, a different type of society, or social transformation, supporting rebellion for its own
Much of the work on consumption within cultural studies advocates an expressivist politics. The romantic and idealized valorization of youth culture and subcultures is expressivist as is the view of the consumer as artist, actively constructing and expressing a unique self through creative consumption. The valorization of disaffected and rebellious youth cultures tends to ignore questions of outcome, or engage with the question of youth that cannot be painted as deviant or transgressive. What impact, if any, does the supposed play with or subversion of the meanings of particular commodities have? What are the political consequences of their claimed resistance and are they progressive? While mainstream or reactionary youth are neglected in this work, also neglected is any discussion of how youthful disaffection gives way to self-normalization, that is how rebellious youth “grow-up.”

The view of consumers as active agents styling their identity via the creative fashioning of the self is also a romantic one. Based on the contention that class distinctions have receded in significance in the individual’s sense of identity, it is suggested that identities are increasingly shaped by consumption practices in which consumers freely choose elements of their identity, breaching established social divisions (Dunn 1998; Hall 1989; Hall, in Sparks 1996; McRobbie 1992). These arguments downplay the role of class in consumption practices and stress consumer creativity, the appropriation of the meanings of symbolic goods in an expanded marketplace and in the expression and creation of unique selves and lifestyles. Not only do these arguments exaggerate the creativity of an unfettered and “knowing” consumer, ignoring differences in access to commodities as well as the ideological manipulation of advertising and of the products themselves, they echo the logic of the market in which advertisers encourage the conflation of
identity with consumption choice. Consumer culture pushes class and other social constraints into the background, suggesting that the individual is responsible for his/her own success and happiness all conveniently available in a choice of lifestyle and chargeable to Mastercard. The culmination of these arguments is realized in the model offered on Lifestyle programming - the neo-liberal citizen-consumer.

**Get A Life**

While *American Idol* may have the highest ratings, lifestyle programming fills far more broadcasting hours and is one of the most prevalent forms of reality TV. In the US most lifestyle programming appears on cable networks, many of which, such as the Food Network, Home and Garden Television (HGTV) and Style Network are devoted almost exclusively to shows that teach how to cook, decorate home and garden, and dress. The popularity of such programming has resulted in other cable networks, such as Bravo, owned by NBC Universal, to launch lifestyle programs, including the popular *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, in which a group of gay men known as the “Fab Five,” give a make-over to a straight man and his home or apartment.\(^1\) The Style Network is owned by Comcast, the largest cable operator in the U.S. Comcast is also one of the largest providers of internet service and the owner of E! Entertainment Network and the Golf Channel.

The Learning Channel, purchased by Discovery Communications in 1991, also recognized the potential offered by lifestyle television and throughout the 1990s began to change

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\(^1\) While I do not want to digress into a discussion of gender, it should be noted that gay men have benefitted from the explosion of lifestyle programming as they often are the taste “experts.” On many of the programs being a gay male appears to be the only credential for expertise. Lifestyle programming provides a safe venue for gay men as they are divorced from any expression of sexual desire. It could also be argued that these programs promote stereotypes as, not only are gay men framed as experts in decor and fashion, they are often flamboyant.
its focus from education and documentary type programming to material aimed at popular consumption. The network moved away from being known as The Learning Channel, instead adapting the moniker, TLC and adding the tagline “LifeUnscripted” to its logo in 1999. Discovery Communications has also launched similar lifestyle programming networks in the UK, such as Discovery Home and Leisure, many of which are available in other global markets.

E. W. Scripps, owner of Scripps Networks, a leader in lifestyle television and owner of the Food Network and HGTV, has also moved into the global space. In 2007 Scripps teamed with a Dubai EAE-based company, Takhayal Entertainment, to launch Fatafeat TV (Food Network), expanding its global exposure to over twenty Arabic-speaking countries, in addition to countries such as France, Korea, and New Zealand, among others. According to Kristen Jordan, Senior Vice President of International Development for Scripps, the popularity of Fatafeat displayed, “the huge demand of the Middle Eastern audience for the inspirational and informational series that have made our lifestyle brands household names.” He went on to add that, “Scripps is honored to help serve as a catalyst for the emergence of lifestyle TV around the world with compelling programming that transcends the boundaries of geography and culture to appeal to a universal audience.” Even in Iraq you can learn how to make a 30-minute meal from Rachel Ray. The success of the channel has led Takhayal to launch a lifestyle network in the fall of 2007 which will import programming from several Scripps Channels, such as HGTV, DIY Do It Yourself Network, and the Fine Living channel (BusinessWire 2007).

The global reach and popularity of lifestyle programming suggests it is far more significant than is suggested at first glance. While my focus is on the US, I want to suggest that my arguments can be used to think about the global phenomena and its significance in regard to
conceptions of self and identity via the process of consumption and the model of the citizen as consumer, a model in which transformation takes place at the level of the self.

While it has been suggested that the significance of class in relation to one’s sense of identity has eroded and been replaced by lifestyle choices, I would argue that class remains a significant factor in our everyday lives, even as we have learned to identify ourselves with commodity culture rather than class position, for, as Bourdieu claimed, taste reflects class and continues to reproduce class differences. At the same time, as the critical theorists claimed, a certain level of affluence and access to a broad array of consumer goods tends to mask these differences and divert our attention from the very real effects of class stratification. Lifestyle programming offers the opportunity to examine this double-functioning of consumption. First it suggests that class can be overcome by accruing cultural capital – that is by learning how to dress, decorate and eat in such a way as to be perceived differently, to be seen as upwardly mobile and more successful in life. However, in so doing the programs point to the very thing they would efface. Class differences are front and center in lifestyle programming as consumption, and the failure to consume “properly” are at the center of the drama.

The discourses of class are apparent in all forms of lifestyle programming, even surfacing on the Food Network. As Bourdieu argued, food serves as a marker of class position. Certain foods as well as food quantity and the presentation of food all serve as class markers. For example, Bourdieu argued that the “working class meal is characterized by plenty” while the middle-class tended to eat smaller amounts and was more interested in what was considered healthy as well as food presentation. While his work was based on studies of French eating habits, the same can be said to be true in the U.S. where the growing obesity problem is often
associated with class differences and the effect of those differences on food choices. Bourdieu did recognize that class standing was not the only factor in food choices; he argued that gender and other lifestyle factors must be taken into consideration. Nonetheless, relationships to food are seen as tied to class, or habitus.

On the Food Network these differences can be seen by contrasting the program Paula's Home Cooking with Barefoot Contessa. The program names are, in themselves, suggestive of difference. “Home cooking” is suggestive of family meals and comfort food. The Barefoot Contessa suggests both an earthiness as well as elegance. Both Paula Deen and Ina Garten became network stars later in life but their histories are quite different. Paula Dean, star of Paula’s Home Cooking grew up in Albany, Georgia where her father ran a gas station. She married when she finished highschool and divorced several years later after the family had moved to Savannah. To support herself she started a catering business called The Bag Lady and later opened a restaurant with her two sons, The Lady and Sons. Deen, who had no formal training as a chef and claims to have learned to cook from her grandmother, is known for her focus on Southern comfort food such as fried chicken, okra, and pecan pie. The success of both her restaurant and her cooking show is based on an appeal to “hominess” with plenty of fried foods, hoecakes, yams and greens. Deen even has a recipe for fried macaroni and cheese and fried green bean balls. These meals, laden with carbohydrates and heavy fried foods, are coded as foods of the lower middle or working classes. It can be argued that this is regional food and unrelated to class distinctions. However, I would argue that regions themselves also carry

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2 Comfort food is usually thought of as food that is inexpensive and easy to prepare. It may also carry some emotional attachment or familiarity and may vary with region or ethnicity.
conceptions of class and that the South continues to be seen as lacking in cultural capital, lagging behind the Northeast and West Coast. Deen’s Southern drawl, peppered with “y’alls”, her slightly bouffant hair style, and the way she rubs her tummy after taking a large bite of food, all speak to class distinctions and the lack of cultural capital. *Paula’s Home Cooking* is most often about cooking for the family and providing filling, easy to prepare, home-cooked meals. Presentation is secondary. Deen has parlayed her identity as a self-made Southern belle into a financial success.

Like Deen, Ina Garten of the *Barefoot Contessa* had no formal training. She taught herself to cook by studying French and New England cookbooks. Garten grew up in Connecticut where her father was a doctor, earned an MBA, and at one time worked at the White House. While living in Washington with her husband she began throwing dinner parties, which provided her with the opportunity to share her love of cooking with friends. Garten entered the food business when she purchased a specialty food store in Westhampton Beach, New York with money she had earned redoing homes in historic Washington neighborhoods and reselling them. The shop was called Barefoot Contessa. The store later relocated to East Hampton and Garten sold her business in 1996, turning her energies toward writing cook books. Her success led to an offer by the Food Network for her own show, and the *Barefoot Contessa* premiered in 2002.

Unlike Deen’s show, Garten’s show features far more complex recipes, such as boeuf bourguignon and coeur à la crème, as well simpler seafood dishes, salads and fresh fruits. Garten’s show is filmed at her home in the Hamptons and Garten is often shown visiting local fresh markets to purchase clams, lobsters, and fresh produce as well as specialty shops where she stops for cheeses and meats. She emphasizes quality and freshness. Unlike Deen, Garten’s show
usually features her preparations for entertaining, often girlfriends for brunch or a dinner with friends and her husband, Jeffrey, the Dean of the Yale School of Management. Presentation is simple, yet elegant, with fresh cut flowers from Ina’s garden adorning the table. The opening shot for the show is of the large Hampton home surrounded by green and gardens. The image she projects is one of privilege, a “honeyed slice of American Aristocracy.” Her program offers a look into a lifestyle of privilege; parties and polo, but also “restrained and earthy” – shingled-mansions with a “cottage-like feel,” and farm stands with local produce (Dickerman 2003, np). Bourdieu argued that those who have cultural competence have an assuredness about them; there is the sense of “having always had, as if by immemorial gift” a level of cultural competency – their taste appears natural and unlearned (1984, 329). As Sara Dickerman writes, this is exactly what we sense with Ina Garten, “a distinctly upper class sense of ease and graciousness, of not needing to try too hard” (2003, np).

Class discourse is also apparent in the many programs dedicated to redecorating and/or selling a home. The program Clean House (Style) on the Style Network is aimed at the lower middle class demographic. It is hosted by never-made-it-big actress (Niecy Nash) supported by a team of “experts,” which include a designer, an organizer and garage sale diva. The focus in these programs is not design however, it is the organization of clutter. Filmed in Los Angeles, the application form states that all applicants must live in Southern California, and their homes must be cluttered, a pack rat’s nest where people have grown tired of their family’s clutter and

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3 Clean Sweep on TLC is almost identical in format. It is aimed at the same demographic, is hosted by actress Tava Smiley, has a garage sale and inexpensive home makeover, with the work and design done by the team of “experts.” Unlike Clean House on Style, TLC does not name the products used on the Clean Sweep show nor are their links to vendors on the website. However, like Clean House, Clean Sweep pushes the “victims” to do away with the old and replace with the new.
disorganization. The format is a simple one involving three segments; the humiliation, the makeover, and the transformation or reveal. The first segment involves Niecy and crew meeting with the homeowners and filming their messy surroundings, usually piled high and strewn across every available surface. They poke fun at the “victims” lack of good taste and failure to distinguish trash from treasure. Suggesting underlying “issues” may be keeping the family from letting go of outdated or unused items or collections, Niecy and crew beg and cajole the family to let go of their clutter. The items are sold in a yard sale to raise money for the makeover. Once the sales are complete the family is sent to a hotel for twenty-four hours while the team gets to work.

The discourse of class is made evident not only in the disparaging remarks about taste and housekeeping skills, but also in the makeover, the second segment. The team will work on two or three rooms of a home with a small budget, usually about two-thousand dollars, and a twenty-four hour time frame. The fixes include paint, usually in bright, camera-friendly colors, inexpensive window treatments, slip-covers, inexpensive furniture, and, most importantly, storage units to organize the family belongings. The teams perform most of the labor. Clean House often has bonuses, such as a new carpet, with the name of the vendor who provided the gift mentioned in the show. In Distinction Bourdieu discusses the petit bourgeois desire for upward mobility and its imitation of the culture of the bourgeoisie, the energy spent in making the home look more spacious than it is through the use of storage areas, movable partitions, and the creation of areas designed for specific uses. They may turn to “experts” for guidance in becoming stylish (1984, 321, 359). In reality television lower middle class families imitate the taste of the middle class with the aid of designer/actors and organizers. Class is not erased
however. The victims lack cultural capital and must turn to others to supplement their own lack of knowledge. Moreover, the plastic storage bins, baskets, press board shelving, and inexpensive partitions used to hide or divide spaces, as well as the make-do decor on a budget, all serve as markers of their class positioning. The final segment of *Clean House* features a “reveal,” the moment when the family returns home to see their newly remodeled home. The family is overcome with happiness; tears are shed as they move from space to space, thanking the crew for transforming their lives.

*Clean House* contrasts sharply with a program such as *Landscapers Challenge* on HGTV, in which three landscape designers compete to win a design contract for an outdoor space with budgets ranging between twenty-five thousand to one-hundred thousand plus for a yard, often the size of a postage stamp, or rooftop garden. These are not down-and-dirty overnight fixes and may take months of work. Aimed at the suburban middle class and inner city up-and-comings, assumptions about class and cultural capital are apparent in the positioning of the consumers. First, it is assumed that the consumers have adequate cultural capital to choose a designer; second, the consumer is not ridiculed and they are often invited to accompany the expert on trips to select plant material, pots, or landscaping stones.

While class discourses are evident in each of these programs, and they are aimed at different demographics, their main function is as inducements to consume. Both Deen and Garten have their own line of products which they sell online and elsewhere. But their programs also promote the consumption of particular “lifestyles.” Deen is selling an idea of Southern comfort and family fare, while Garten is selling an image of a cultured New England upper class and a lifestyle of gracious living. Home makeover programs also promote the consumption of
lifestyles and conflate lifestyle with identity, suggesting that appearances are reflections of who we are. The garage sale on *Clean House* does not suggest that the victims should consume less, only that they should consume differently. As Bourdieu pointed out, taste is asserted negatively; disgust is expressed at the taste of others (1984, 56). In programs such as *Clean House*, the victims lack of taste is made evident in the humiliation segment. The old stuff is replaced by the new; household items which the experts see as “dated” are sold and new items are bought to give the homes a new look, an imitation of a lifestyle they (the victims) want to appear to have. *Clean House* also integrates advertising into its program, naming the vendors where each item can be purchased and providing links to the vendors on their website. *Landscapers Challenge* is also selling lifestyle, whether it is suburban low maintenance with room to romp for children and pets or city spaces designed for entertaining friends. These programs all suggest that our lives can easily be transformed by consumption; struggle is removed from the public sphere and placed in the realm of the private – “free choice between brands and gadgets.”

Nowhere is the conflation of consumption with identity more apparent than in the lifestyle programming focused on fashioning the self. Programs such as *What Not to Wear* (TLC) and *How Do I Look* (Style) share an almost identical format. The American version of *What Not To Wear* (*WNTW*) premiered in 2003 and is based on a British program of the same name which first aired in 2001. The British version is broadcast in several countries around the globe. *How Do I Look* (*HDIL*) and *WNTW* both feature a “fashion victim” turned in for committing a fashion “crime” by friends or family. Application forms make it clear what the programs are

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4 The number of makeover shows continues to increase; *Tim Gunn’s Guide to Style* premiered on Bravo in the summer of 2007. The format is similar to *WNTW* and *HDIL*. Jay Manuel helps a makeover candidate to look like their favorite star in *Style Her Famous* on the Style Network. *10 Years Younger* on TLC humiliates victims by placing them in a plexiglass box as passers by guess their age. The process is repeated after a makeover.
looking for. *HDIL*’s states they are actively seeking “people who wear a lot of prints, patterns, animal prints, polyesters, wild outfits, ‘80s and ‘70s styles, et cetera. The more unique the look, the better.” *WNTW* is looking for “disasters” who “squeeze into clothes that are two sizes too small” or into clothing so large it is shaped like a tent, who are stuck in time, or wear bejeweled sweatshirts and stretch pants. The formats are similar to home makeover shows; they include the humiliation, the makeover, and the reveal. The humiliation segments for the two programs differ slightly, but for both the goal is the same; to shame and bully the victims, make them doubt their own preferences and look to others for help. In *WNTW* the humiliation takes the form of hidden camera footage as hosts Stacy London and Clinton Kelly, both of whom bill themselves as fashion consultants, make sneering and derogatory comments. The victim is confronted by friends and hosts and persuaded to accept a makeover. The second part of the humiliation process involves sorting through the participant’s wardrobe as Stacy and Clinton criticize their clothing choices and throw the clothes away. Participants on *HDIL* go through a similar process. Actress host Finola Hughes first meets with the victim whose “look” is criticized by two friends or family members and one professional stylist (the accomplices). The accomplices pick the clothes they hate the most to throw out while the victim is given the opportunity to defend her style choices. The second segment involves the makeover. On *WNTW* the victim is given a list of rules along with five thousand dollars and sent to New York for a two-day shopping spree. The first day Stacy and Clinton watch, making snide remarks about the victims failure to understand the rules of fashion. The second day the experts come to the rescue and the victim is guided through the remaining process of selection before heading off to have her hair and make-up styled. On *HDIL* the three accomplices are each given about fifteen hundred dollars and sent
off to choose three complete outfits, a hair style based on a star, and make-up. The victim then
chooses one of the three collections in its entirety, that is, the clothes and hair/make-up choice.
The last segment on both is the transformation or reveal; the victim emerges to find waiting and
anxious friends and family – all of whom are thrilled at the transformation. The victims all thank
everyone profusely.

Like the home makeover programs, self makeover programs are about learning and
mimicking the taste of the middle class. Unlike the claim made by cultural studies that class
distinctions recede into the background, these programs highlight class difference; then suggest
it can be overcome with a wardrobe change. While cultural studies imagines a consumer as an
artist creating a self as pastiche, a bricolage of disparate elements and styles that confuse and
breach the boundaries of core social identities, makeover programs demonstrate the desire to
learn the proper rules of fashion, to learn to conform to consumption patterns that demarcate
middle-classness. The model of the self in these programs is one of self as consumer; the self is
little more than a mannequin or billboard for the display of goods and brands, self as
advertisement. You are what you consume.

In WNTW and HDIL the victims are seen as lacking cultural capital; they are “turned-in”
by friends and family for their failure to have learned middle-classness. This failure was
expressed by victim Thon, a “Harley Mama” on HDIL when she explained that appearance was
“an area of my life I haven’t schooled myself on.” Again, as Bourdieu argued this need for
learning is in itself an expression of their failure, for the “important thing is to know without
having learnt,” that is for cultural capital to appear as a given. This discourse of class is threaded
throughout the programs in which a major fashion “crime” is to be seen as being too overtly
sexy, or too dowdy, that is, to wear sweat pants or stretch pants in public. A teaser for WNTW has Clinton referring to a victim as a “ho.” Daughters often turn in their mothers and mothers turn in their daughters. Cynthia’s daughter turned her in because she felt embarrassed and ashamed of her mother who looked too “trashy” and too ‘70s/’80s. Debi’s daughters felt her look wasn’t “appropriate” or “respectable” and thought her “sexy look is too trashy,” like a “barfly.” A hurt Debi responded “you’re so classy you can’t even hang out with me.” Victim Amanda’s mother believes her daughter could be arrested for walking the streets, saying she looks “cheap” and like “a trash-magnet.” Class is also emphasized in the episode subtitles used on HDIL, such as the one featuring Amanda, dubbed “Class Dismissed”; during the segment Hughes refers to the makeover as going “from trash to class.” These episodes reveal a broad understanding of distinctions between “classiness” and “trashiness,” and between those who have learned the rules and those, like Thon, who have not.

Learning middle-classness also involves the erasure of any signs of eccentricity; victims are not only too sexy, they are too manly, too feminine frilly, dress too young, too old, too dated, or too extreme. Despite Style Network’s tagline “It’s So You!,” and the emphasis placed on your own unique style, uniqueness must always be contained or as a pro-stylist on HDIL put it, “Chic, sophisticated, with just a little bit of you.” WNTW’s Stacy found one victim’s style too manly, saying from the back she looked like a Mack truck. Clinton and Stacy found victim Natalie’s self-described gothic-punk look too unprofessional and young and wanted to give her a look that was “edgy” but followed the rules. On HDIL young women who identify their sense of self with any kind of “resistant” look are reined in. Ludmilla, (“From Pack Rat to Pretty Woman”) who describes her look as pack rat, believes her style is an expression of who she is
and doesn’t want to change it. However, after her makeover she feels she looks “very sophisticated and I am expressing myself without overdoing it.” Ashley, who described her look as gothic said “I’m not going to like it if they change me – by changing my look you are changing me.” But she is reassured by the pro-stylist, who lets the audience know that “I’m not trying to change her. I’m just trying to help her find her identity – which she already has – I’m just trying to develop it”; another stylist assured Danielle that he would give her a style that “reflects your own personality and is all your own.”

Signs of ethnicity are also “erased.” Tyra’s ethnic influenced wardrobe is labeled as silly, and is replaced, her natural hair highlighted. Celeste’s naturally frizzy hair is brought under control (“Hair Today, Style Tomorrow”) and her offbeat look contained. After her transformation she happily chirps, “I was hoping to stand out and still be unique, in a good way.” Only one of the many episodes I viewed featured an unhappy victim. Laurie Hyink, whose daughter said she was embarrassed by her mother’s bleached blond hair and wanted her mother to get rid of her unnatural and dated look, said she was “comfortable with who I am” and “would like to keep my blond hair . . . if I got rid of it it would be throwing away Laurie.” After her transformation she did not effuse happily over her new look although she did like her new clothes. Her greatest disappointment was the loss of her blond hair and she refused to look at herself in a mirror. She expressed hurt, saying of her family “I hope they’re happy. I did this completely for them. I aim to please.”

The normalizing effect of these programs should not be viewed as one-sided. Any resistance by victims is short-lived as they express the desire to be unique and special, but also to conform and fit in. Trashy Amanda “feel[s] like a new person.” “Not So Sweet Sixteen” Alyssa,
whose punk look has been replaced by “sweet” feels “good” and is “happy.” Rather than being artists, these victims want to learn the rules of fashion, to learn how to buy individuality correctly. In a culture in which advertising conflates identity with product choice, and advertisers sell products as symbols of distinction and projections of individuality and uniqueness, consumers are pressured to buy products that carry pre-established and easily read signs of individuality. Apple’s Steve Jobs has a black turtleneck coolness as opposed to Bill Gate’s plaid shirt nerdiness. Even “tweens” aged six to fourteen are targeted by advertisers who recognize tweens know what brands they like and have increasing spending power. This conforming individuality fits well with flexible capitalism and a market which offers a plethora of goods and choices even though those same choices are available globally.

In fact, these programs make shopping for conforming individuality easy. Both *WNTW* and *HDIL* film the shoppers as they walk into the assigned stores (shoppers are given a list on each program), and cameras focus on the store name on both building and shopping bags. Salons and cosmetics used are also named. Style Network’s *HDIL* provides a complete list of stores for each new look on their website as well as links to the various salons, Stila cosmetics, shopping centers and stores. Again, these programs function as inducements to consume, to replace the old with the new. If the self is what we wear, nothing more than pose and billboard, the self is always found wanting, as there is always the pressure to consume the new and different, or as the critical theorists argued there is always the failure to deliver fulfillment.

The stress on the transformation of the self in lifestyle programming and in cultural studies shifts our focus to what feminist Gloria Steinem called a “revolution from within” (1993). Lifestyle programs show the consequence of that shift as a political stance. Change is
seen as taking place at a micro level, through individual signifying practices. Buying a lifestyle, adapting a pose, individual transformation (the reveal), replaces any need for systemic change. This expressivist tendency enables and contributes to advanced capitalism in which image is privileged and every aspect of life, including the self, is commodified. The critical theorists argued that affluence led to a level of comfort and pleasure which militated against quantitative change. Expressivism as a politics reflects this quiescence. Returning to Marcuse’s warning, it is significant to remember that “the range of choice is not the decisive factor in determining the degree of human freedom, but what can be chosen and what is chosen by the individual” (1966, 7). I hope we can imagine a freedom that is not defined by a Coca-cola jingle.
CONCLUSION

John Oliver: And the Democrats of course have yet to play their final card.
Jon Stewart: Which is?
JO: Nothing
JS: Their final card is to not play a final card?
JO: Exactly. Look, the Republicans had an ideological agenda and look what its gotten us. Right now, Americans are finding the Democrats utter lack of vision or coherent view very appealing. I think this new campaign ad really captures the existential vacuum that is today’s Democratic Party. Take a look!

Image of blank TV screen with sound of chirping birds. Screen changes to display image of Sherrod Brown and banner reading “Paid for by the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee” with voice of Brown saying, “I’m Sherrod Brown and I approve this message.”


In my introduction, I argued that the left has failed to provide an alternative vision of how we might imagine the world differently. I suggest that cultural studies, which in its origins conceived itself as political, has retreated from a critical analysis of economic determinants and the implications of class positioning. In lieu of an analysis which engages critically with the relationships between production and consumption, cultural studies has moved toward an uncritical and populist celebration of transgression, subversion, and consumer pleasure and freedom.

My uneasiness with this trend may be nothing more than a reflection of my own dashed hopes. Unlike most students who enter graduate programs in order to pursue career goals, I entered graduate school as a non-traditional student with a non-traditional goal: I wanted to better understand the workings of oppression so that I might better understand how change might occur. It is not that I believed that cultural studies could change the world; it is that I hoped for a political pedagogy that contributed to the creation of a critical consciousness and political praxis. As a masters student I waited tables in a town in Georgia with women who needed my help to fill out employment forms. Most did not have a checking account and did not know how a
checking account worked. One woman and her teenage daughter both worked at the restaurant; the mother found out her daughter was pregnant the day she went into labor. The daughter had starved herself to hide her pregnancy. At school I was reading Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* and trying to think through her claim that gender was a performance that could be subverted. Yet, I saw nothing new in the claim that gender was performative; wasn’t this something that all women knew? Didn’t we play dress-up as little girls? The women I worked with understood this yet they also understood what Butler appeared not to; that is, that understanding gender as role-playing, as had been argued long before Butler, had little to do with the material conditions of women’s lives; knowing and subverting are not only not the same - there is also the question of what such a subversion would accomplish. As scholars, I would argue that we must examine the implications of our claims; how do they play out in the real and material world?

Cultural studies might be accused of being overly optimistic; in the desire to locate individual agency and set itself apart from what it saw as the dire cynicism of the Frankfurt School, cultural studies has found practices of resistance everywhere. As I have argued, cultural studies scholars have engaged in partial readings of theoretical work to support claims regarding the subversive nature of transgression; neither Foucault or Bakhtin argued that transgression was inherently subversive.¹ By focusing on transgression’s breaching of boundaries and/or inversions, there has been a failure to engage with how transgression is contained. As Foucault argued, transgression relies on the very law or boundary it would breach; thus, transgression confirms the authority of the limit. Bakhtin recognized and stressed the temporary nature of carnival inversion and argued that in contemporary culture inversion has lost its force and

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¹ See my discussion regarding the work of Foucault and Bakhtin in chapter three. Also see Bakhtin, 1984, and Foucault, 1980.
become little more than cynicism. For both theorists transgression is an ecstatic moment, a temporary breaching of limits followed by a recuperation and a reimposition of those limits. Thus, I argue that as scholars it is necessary to address how transgression is accommodated and appropriated; moreover, we must situate transgression within a market economy in which transgression itself has been commodified. This is exemplified by reality television and its “pushing the envelope,” through the rapid normalization of “taboo” behaviors as found in Fear Factor and Wife Swap, and through recuperation; the moral of the story in Wife Swap is the strengthening of the family unit; the grass is not greener on the other side. Contrary to the more celebratory accounts of transgression, I have argued that transgression has little relative value as praxis.

I have also argued that the focus on the active consuming audience and the near elimination of any analysis of the relationship between production and consumption has led to exaggerated claims regarding audience agency and the democratization of media culture. Inverting what is seen as the pessimistic passive audience approach of the Frankfurt School theorists, cultural studies too often fails to question the implications of audience activity, assuming that activity itself is resistant or democratizing per se. I argue that such a conclusion can only be reaching by ignoring the relationship between consumption and production and the growing global marketplace. Activity and resistance are not coterminus; as both the Frankfurt theorists and Gramsci argued we may actively participate in our own domination. Reality TV, which would seem to be a model of democratic audience participation, demonstrates the implications of arguments regarding audience freedoms and activity evacuated from economic analysis. Rather than a democratization of television, I argue that reality TV provides a format
for new business models, increasing opportunities for brand extension, free labor, and the monitoring of consumer wants. Thus, the interactivity of reality TV provides a false sense of empowerment while serving the needs of producers and advertisers.

Lastly, I have argued that celebratory accounts of consumption by cultural studies scholars has led to an expressivist conception of politics in which social transformation takes place through individual transformation and self-expression. Such an expressivist politics was evident in early work on subcultures and their use of commodities as signifying practices and the contemporary work which views broad access to commodities as democratizing and as providing individuals creative opportunities for expression of the self. In such arguments identity is conflated with consumption and lifestyle choices and traditional core identities, such as class identity, are broached through the creative self-fashioning of the individual consumer. The implications of these arguments are evidenced in lifestyle programming which suggests that the resolution to all problems lies in the transformation of self and home. Thus, the onus for change always lies with the individual and structural constraints and limitations become invisible. This view echoes the logic of neo-liberalism in which the individual is defined as an autonomous consuming subject.

This is a polemical and one-sided dissertation; it is not impartial. I have argued that particular directions within cultural studies have signaled a loss of political will and foreclosed on directions that might lead to imagining things differently. The ready dismissal of work, such as that of the Frankfurt School, has served to limit the questions posed. Thus, this dissertation can be read as a call to arms; it is trying to correct a tendency in cultural studies that has gone too far. While John Fiske is often cited as exemplifying all that is wrong with cultural studies, his
work exemplifies broad-based trends within the discipline: the bracketing off of economics; the focus on resistance and pleasure and the ignoring of how hegemony is maintained; the retreat from ideological analysis; the celebration of individual agency and the failure to engage with macro-politics. I am calling for a greater sense of political engagement; a radical pedagogy rather than a radical posturing.

While I have addressed particular points of contention I have only cursorily addressed other concerns. The retreat from metanarratives and the movement toward a non-judgemental relativism poses other concerns for a politically engaged cultural studies. First, without extrapolating from one particular circumstance to another we are left without a ground from which to make broad-based political claims; we are left with individual stories and individual truths. Rather than theorizing we should be writing autobiographies. In trying to avoid the appearance of elitism, cultural studies scholars abdicate any responsibility for differentiating between truth claims or differentiating value; at the same time they grant epistemic privilege to “the people.” However, such an abdication leads to political quietism; there is little room for critique, far less for macro-political engagement.

Second, cultural studies scholars fail to acknowledge the judgemental claims they do make. For example, not only do cultural studies scholars focus on popular mass culture, as opposed to high culture, they focus on a narrow range of popular culture, that which can be framed as in some way progressive, that is, it is culture that is popular with certain groups of people already identified. Thus, we find celebratory accounts of the empowering potential of rap music and of its resistance to white hegemony; but we do not find celebratory accounts of the music of white power rock groups such as Final Solution and Mudoven, or of christian rock.
Cultural studies scholars paint romantic pictures of “deviant” youth cultures which they can, at least in particular ways, position as progressively resistant, but fail to acknowledge the deviant neo-nazi youth subcultures associated with the National Alliance or European Americans United. Fundamentalist youth groups such as Teen Mania Ministries and its Battle Cry campaign are also ignored. Thus, there is really no interest in disaffected youth per se, but only in particular disaffected youth.

By focusing on resistance, cultural studies scholars have also failed to take into account dominant readings and behaviors, that is, there is a failure to account for those of us who follow the path of least resistance. In so doing scholars ignore the fact that for the most part, most people do not engage in reading against the grain or resistant decodings. It is only through acknowledging dominant readings that we can we begin to probe how hegemony is maintained and how a counter-hegemony might be imagined.

Another concern, one that I feel is linked to a retreat from grand narratives and the move toward relativism, is what I would call the fetishization of difference. In celebrating alterity and positioning the “other” as completely unknowable, cultural studies scholars (and postcolonial scholars) again go too far. For I would argue that it is that which we share, the recognition of our common humanity, that enables empathy and motivates us to act against injustices. If the “other” is totally incommensurate, and I cannot generalize between persons at all, nor in any way speak for him/her, what grounding do I have for making political claims on their behalf or demanding equality? As Seyla Benhabib argues, “the activation of differences may not amount to a democratic respect of the right of the other to be, but to a conservative plea to place the other, because of her otherness, outside the pale of our common humanity and mutual responsibility”
S.P. Mohanty has also posed concerns regarding relativism and the essentializing of difference:

To believe that you have your space and I mine; to believe, further, that there can be no responsible way in which I can adjudicate between your space - cultural and historical - and mine by developing a general set of criteria that would have interpretive validity in both contexts ...to believe both these things is also to assert ... that all spaces are equivalent: that they have equal value, that since the lowest common principle of evaluation is all that I can invoke, I cannot - and consequently need not - think about how your space impinges on mine, or how my history is defined together with yours. If that is the case, I may have started by declaring a pious political wish, but I end by denying that I need to take you seriously. Plurality instead of a single homogeneous space, yes. But also, unfortunately, debilitating insular spaces. (1989, 14-15)

Totalities do not go away because we wish them to; eschewing all generalization disables a cultural critique and limits conceptual frameworks. It limits our ability to see larger patterns, such as the working of global capital. We are again left with individual stories and explanations. The fetishization of difference also leads to granting epistemic privilege; for here again particular scholars have romanticized the “other” as having authentic access to truth.

I have only briefly mentioned the disciplining of cultural studies and the commodification of knowledge. In an era in which students have become customers and some colleges are requiring that faculty serve as customer service representatives, it is hardly surprising that knowledge is seen as a product. Theory has not been immune to this process; new theories are trendy and fashionable. Old work is discarded. Academics create their own intellectual stars or idols; theories and stars are like brand names and we drop them in the same way we wear branded clothing. We identify ourselves as scholars by the brands we choose. In lieu of a radical politics we choose a radical posturing. At academic conferences fanlettes hover adoringly around figures such as Lawrence Grossberg in his black turtleneck and silvering
ponytail. Publishers, such as Routledge, cater to the trendy and always new. There needs to be further interrogation of these trends in education; how do they influence our work as scholars? Are the frameworks we use and the questions we pose limited by the desire to sell ourselves and our discipline and the needs for success on both parts? Does the discarding of older theoretical arguments disable and curtail the explanatory power of our arguments or are they enabling? Do we grab on to particular ideas, such as queerness, because they sell? Does our scholarship exploit the very inequalities we seek to undo?

There are also other areas that could be developed; while I have made arguments about particular directions in cultural studies and turned to reality television to examine the implications of these directions, there is a need to connect these arguments to other cultural symptoms. For example, how do these arguments hold up to the claims of the democratizing potential of the internet? Are sites such as YouTube and MySpace transgressive? Do they offer everyone the opportunity to become an author? If so, what are the material implications of that authorship? What are the implications for our sense of identity? Does the increasingly total penetration of the internet by the market bring into question our suppositions?

Cultural studies needs a reality check. Capital is not “a more fractured and fragile entity” as McRobbie suggested; it is becoming increasing global (1992, 724). Cultural studies has underestimated the voraciousness of capitalism and the extent to which culture has become commodified, the extreme interpenetration of culture and capital. In its celebratory accounts of consumption it has, perhaps unintentionally, come to mimic the language of the market, of consumer choice, and the desire for the always new. As both Thomas Frank (2001) and Nicholas Garnham (2000) have argued, as scholars we need to engage with marketing literature and
research. And I would argue we need to watch CNBC, the financial channel. As interdisciplinary scholars we need to be truly interdisciplinary. We can’t ground our arguments in wishful thinking. We need to consider the arguments we make in relation to the claims of marketers and CEO’s. Are we making the same claims? How do they differ? For example, CEO’s love interactivity; media conglomerates see interactivity as generating ancillary revenue, through such activity as texting. Creative construction of identity that erases class? Lululemon is a manufacturer of upscale yoga and athletic clothing. CEO Bob Meers claims Lululemon is a lifestyle. But it is lifestyle only available to some; the company will not downmarket its products because they would lose cache. It will continue to locate company stores in wealthy markets. Meers also points out how niche markets do not mean fragmented markets; Lululemon’s business is global (Mad Money 2007). The niche market is a mass market.

I also advocate a return to the Frankfurt School. This does not mean an uncritical acceptance of every argument, nor am I positing Critical Theory as a the only answer. As Adorno and Horkheimer argued, theory is not “invariable to the movement of history” (2000, xi). However it does mean that we return to the work of the Frankfurt School and take it seriously, rather than read it dismissively. Yes, there have been definite changes in the structure of capitalism and those changes require rethinking some of the arguments and conclusions of the Critical Theorists. But I believe we are in danger of overstating those changes. We need to question in what ways capitalism has really changed and in what ways it remains the same. The political economy of the Frankfurt School, its historicizing of the changes in culture which are particular to specific material conditions, its recognition of the interpenetration of culture and capital, its attention to ideology and the mollification of dissent, and its suspiciousness require
rethinking. As Szeman has argued, a serious engagement with the Frankfurt School is a “dangerous proposal” for it would mean the end of cultural studies as practiced” (2002, 65-66). Nonetheless, it is a necessary step. Cultural studies motivating force has been a defense of the popular; to that end cultural studies has ended up reifying commodity culture. As Szeman argues we have accepted “commodity culture as culture,” exactly what Adorno and Horkheimer attacked (2002, 69). Is this the best we can do? Can we not visualize alternatives? Can we not imagine a freedom not defined by a Coca-cola jingle?

As Herman Gray has argued there is a need to reassess where cultural studies is going:

While the ‘culture’ in cultural studies necessarily remains a central concept of critical analysis and a vehicle for important forms of social organization and transformation, to what extent, I wonder, has the category of culture in this new climate been cut loose from the articulation between the global and the local, from those multiple locations of material and cultural practice which provide the context, the juice, the drive for cultural studies in the first place? Is it a consequence of the turn toward culture (and the success of cultural studies) that cultural questions and questions about culture are no longer articulated to and through social and material conditions that make it necessary also to inquire into questions of power, policy, inequality, and social justice? (1996, 213-214)

There are scholars working in alternative directions. Mark Andrejevic’s (2004) work on reality television and interactive media serves as an excellent example, situating his discussion within a broader social context and the needs of global capital. Andrejevic enlists the work of Adorno as well as Zizek to make strong arguments about interactivity and surveillance, casting doubt on the promise of democracy on offer. Jon Dovey’s work, Freakshow (2000), is also an excellent example of the analysis of particular television genres, such as confessional talk shows, in the context of the political economy of mass media, taking political economy as his starting point.

In my introduction I argued that the left has failed to offer an alternative vision, a common
vision that people can aspire to. That gap has been easily filled with the right’s appeals to religiosity, nationalism, and the nuclear family. As cultural studies scholars I call for us to participate in constructing that vision. As Jon Erikson argues, “resistance only makes sense if there is an alternative vision that allows us to think otherwise . . . and not only with the terms ‘given us’: that is, to imagine a way of living or operating that is not solely defined by what we are transgressing, resisting, or deconstructing” (1990, 235). I am calling for us, as intellectuals, to participate in creating a counter-hegemonic bloc (not an anti-hegemonic one). We must be missionaries; we can not afford to cling to antinomian pureness and set ourselves apart as more radical than thou. Such a romantic image and expressivist politics is self-serving and as cultural studies scholars now, more than ever, we can’t afford to be self-serving and complacent. The recent release of data by the Internal Revenue Service points to the increasing disparity between the haves and have-nots: the top one percent take home twenty percent of earned income while the bottom fifty percent take home thirteen percent. As Teresa Ebert writes:

What is at stake in this displacement of the economic by discourse is the elision of issues of exploitation and the substitution of a discursive identity politics for the struggle for full social and economic emancipation. . . . This is not to say that conflicts over ideology, cultural practice, and significations are not an important part of the social struggle for emancipation: the issue is how we explain the relation of the discursive to the non discursive, the relation of cultural practices to the ‘real existing world’ . . . in order to transform it. (1996, 42)

As Hall argued we need to think about our theory “as a practice which always thinks about its intervention in a world in which would make some difference, in which it would have some effect. . . . there is all the difference in the world between understanding the politics of intellectual work and substituting intellectual work for politics” (1996, 275).

We have become resigned to the way things are and forgotten that this too, is a historical
moment. Capitalism, as we know it today, will change. Our culture is changing. The question is who will participate in that change. We cannot afford a failure of imagination.
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