

Popular representation: recasting realism

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The avalanche of discussion of modernism and postmodernism in past years has placed the question of 'realism' as a cultural paradigm in a decidedly new light. Realism, post-postmodernism, as it were, has unfortunately not been investigated with the tenacity that it deserves. One main reason for this is that today's debates are largely cast, not in the descriptive and explanatory statements of the social sciences, but instead in the prescriptive utterances of aesthetic and political discourse. In these latter, normative discourses, there are plenty of analysts with a host of good reasons who take the side either of modernism or of postmodernism. But who, with the exception of a few aravistic followers of Lukács, would dare publicly to be identified with the aesthetic and political discourse of realism? This is even more the pity because, as we shall illustrate below, realism is still probably the most pervasive regime of 'signification' in popular culture today, and indeed makes a lot of the running in high culture as well. In this essay, then, we wish rather dispassionately to separate fact from value (though indeed we do hold political and aesthetic values) and operate primarily in the realm of fact. Thus we are permitted more or less coldly to begin to analyse realism in the face of both modernism and postmodernism.

The advantage that the analyst of realism has in the late 1980s, after a good half-decade of widespread debate on postmodernism, is that realism is now much more clearly set into relief as a socially and historically delimited cultural paradigm. This was surely not the case in the controversies surrounding realism in the 1970s. At this point debates were largely dominated by Colin MacCabe (e.g. MacCabe

1981: 216–35). These analyses, from our point of view – and with the hindsight granted to us in the 1990s – had significant shortcomings. MacCabe's notion of realism was both ahistorical and neglected the dimension of the social. That is it first, somehow rather simplistically identified realist culture with 'closed texts' and non-realist cultural products with 'open texts' regardless of the historicity of the former and the latter. Second, MacCabe's virtually singular focus on cultural texts themselves tended to ignore their conditions of production and conditions of reception, and in particular their social conditions of production and reception. Finally, on MacCabe's account the spatio-temporal pervasion of realist cultural forms was almost unlimited. *Le réalisme*, on this view, *était partout*, or at least almost everywhere.

In part the ahistorical and unsociological nature of such analyses was not surprising. MacCabe and his colleagues at *Screen*, like their traditionalist predecessors and counterparts in English departments in the UK, not to mention both avant-garde and traditional figures in both the US and France in modern languages and culture studies more generally, have been primarily involved in *aesthetic* discourse. There is nothing wrong with this, because that is their business. The business of aesthetic discourse is to make evaluative statements, though as Habermas notes, in a subjective mode, and back such statements up with arguments pertaining to aesthetic value. Cultural debates in Germany, to the contrary – and here a lineage extends from Hegel through Simmel and Weber, through Benjamin and Lukács, and from Marcuse and Adorno through contemporaries like Juss and Peter Bürger – have significantly been located in historical, institutional and sociological context. The advantage of such analyses is that both aesthetic and sociological dimensions have been taken seriously. In the Anglo-American and French theoretical worlds, if aesthetic discourse did not take the social dimension seriously, then sociological analysis had paid scant attention to the aesthetic dimension. The very best of such sociological work – for example from the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Culture Studies and that of Pierre Bourdieu and his colleagues – has not centrally engaged with the problem of realism or with the historicity of cultural forms.

What we propose to do in this essay is to begin to make some inroads into such a sociological analysis of realism. In this pursuit we should like first to attempt a re-definition of realism. This re-definition will historically rather radically delimit the types of cultural object that are realist. In this connection we will then argue that a realist aesthetic discourse is used to justify cultural forms which are in important ways non-realist, and in particular to argue for the validity of modernist and postmodernist cultural forms. The second

part of this essay is addressed to demonstrating just how widespread realism is in today's popular culture. In this we contend that realism must be understood as an ideal-type, and is never in popular culture found in anything like its pristine form. The final section then begins to construct around this realist ideal-type – in a vein inspired by the work of Raymond Williams – a periodization, or a historical sociology of popular culture. Here we focus, not so much on cultural products themselves, but on their socio-historical conditions of reception.

REALISM AS A CULTURAL PARADIGM

Realism is a specific and historical cultural configuration. It must be understood in juxtaposition with cultural 'paradigms' which are not realist. The latter include not just modernism and postmodernism, but pre-realist Western cultural configurations, such as medieval art, Western peasant folk culture, and literature and the fine arts in classical antiquity. Non-Western culture – African, Arab, Japanese, Indian, Chinese – is also on most important counts non-realist. Realism is most commonly viewed as having origins in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Renaissance painting and in the nineteenth-century novel. The third of the art forms, music, is not referential in the sense that the visual arts and literature can be. Yet measured and ordered harmonic structure, bearing similarities on important counts with pictorial and narrative realism, do characterize Western classical music – as they characterize equally non-referential neo-classical architecture – from the seventeenth through to the nineteenth centuries. Aspects of such visual, literary and aural realism continue to play a pervasive role in twentieth-century popular culture.

What is it that unites all of these, as well as the popular culture forms we shall discuss below, under the banner of realism? The answer could well be that all are rooted in a particular cosmology, in fact in a particular 'ontology', or theory of the nature of reality. Such ontologies are not any sort of natural preserve of elites, but are just as importantly found in the popular classes. Christian ontology, for example, began as an elite theory of priest-intellectuals before it became an ontology of the masses. The same is true of the ontology in which realism is anchored, which had origins arguably at about the time of the Renaissance as an elite world-view before it became widespread as a 'popular ontology' in the twentieth century.

To define realism is evidently to say that cultural forms must be plausible and significantly conform with visions of reality in everyday life. But to make sociological sense, realism must be substantially

more spatio-temporally delimited than this. Realism must include only cultural forms which conform with a particular vision of everyday reality, with a particular 'high' or 'popular' ontology. Christian day reality, for example, as high or popular ontology, presupposes ontology, that time and space in everyday life are largely constructed and structured through a sort of deity-driven teleology. And Christian narratives in the sphere of culture are typically teleological. Christian narratives have thus been plausible in their very conforming with high and popular ontology, but it makes little sociological sense to call them 'realist'. To be realist a cultural form must be compatible with an ontology rooted in secular and scientific cosmology. And more specifically in a scientific cosmology (based on Galilean and Newtonian concepts) that is primarily mechanistic.

The belief in a specific ontology by elites ('high ontology') or by the masses ('popular ontology') conditions an audience in the reception of particular cultural forms. But the cultural forms (or a cultural paradigm such as realism) is *not* the same thing as high or popular ontology. A cultural paradigm is instead a *regime of signification*. A 'regime of signification' is a particular mode of signifying. Modernism, for example, as a regime of signification, devalues the 'referent' to emphasize the formal qualities of signifiers. Postmodernism as a regime of signification once again puts important value on the referent, but then problematizes the referent itself, so that the place of the signifier is often taken by the referent and that of the referent by the signifier. The corresponding postmodernist popular ontology features the pervasion of reality itself by representations. In a corresponding vein, pre-realist (and many non-Western) modes of signification, in their characteristic weighting of symbolism, tend to privilege the signified. Signifiers here point thus not to the referent (that is, to reality) but to signifieds or meanings of a higher order, such as deities or ideal forms as in some varieties of classicism. The realist mode of signification privileges the referent, as does postmodernism. But referent and signifier in realism, unlike postmodernism, are clearly differentiated, each in its proper place. Realism, modernism and postmodernism are all regimes of signification which are situated in the culture of Western modernity. Realism's origins were in early modernity, and modernism's and postmodernism's are in 'late' modernity. Unlike pre-modern or non-Western modes of signification, all three of these modes in Western modernity devalue symbolism and the role of the signified. Finally, unlike pre-modern and non-Western aesthetic discourses, whose main legitimization arguments relate to cultural forms corresponding to an ideal world of some sort, all three of modernity's modes of signification are backed

by aesthetic discourses of realism, in which correspondence to reality (and not to an ideal world) is an important criterion of validity.

By 'aesthetic discourse' we mean, straightforwardly, a set of arguments for the validity or value of particular high- or popular-culture representations. Our argument is that realist arguments or assumptions are used in regard to the merit of very non-realist (modernist or postmodernist) art. For example, the modernist novel, as Peter Bürger suggests in chapter 4 above, is situated not in an objective reality, but in experience. Yet aesthetic discourse or arguments for the value of these novels could understand such experience as part of the very grain of reality. Or correspondingly 'punk' in popular music, which has commonly been seen as postmodern, foregrounds cacophony, disharmony and an aesthetic of the ugly. Yet arguments for the value of punk would stress how all of this is in fact quite consistent with a brutal, highly contingent if not chaotic reality. Thus realist arguments are used to legitimate classic realist, modernist and postmodernist culture. It is true that such arguments presuppose varying notions of the real. But that said, each does have recourse to the real. And this suggests that realism, modernism and postmodernism have more in common with one another than with non-Western or pre-modern art. Which further implies that all three are situated in the broad framework of Western modernity. More on this below.

There seem to be three main parameters of realism: (1) realism offers a window on the world; (2) realism employs a narrative which has rationally ordered connections between events and characters; (3) realism conceals authorship and disguises the production process of a text. Let us consider these in sequence.

(1) Realism offers a window on the world. Our first and second parameters largely correspond to on the one hand pictorial, and on the other, narrative realism. Pictorial realism, indeed the pictorial qualities of any cultural paradigm, is a matter of the organization of space. Narrative realism, and the narrative qualities of all cultural paradigms, have to do with the organization of time. All cultural paradigms – realist, modernist, postmodernist, Christian, Chinese and Indian – can be characterized in terms of their specific mode of organization of time and space. They can be characterized in terms of (a) *how* time and space are organized and (b) in terms of *what* imparts organization to time and space. On the first of these counts realist time and space are organized along lines of order and stability

rather than of contingency and instability. This sort of spatio-temporal organization is found also in non-realist, for example Christian and classical Greek, cultural paradigms, though it definitively is *not* present in modernist and postmodernist cultural paradigms.

Regarding the spatial organization of representations, paradigmatic for realism is of course quattrocento perspective (see Martin Jay in chapter 7, below) and its assumptions of a single viewing eye. On this account the painting mediates between the eye and the reality (say, the landscape depicted). It is true that *all* culture mediates, but in quattrocento perspective – and pictorial realism – such mediation takes a very specific form. There are three particular assumptions at work here which regard producer, text and audience or correspondingly speaker, utterance and addressee:

- (a) In the position of producer or speaker is, not the author, but the referent or reality itself. Note that previous to realism, the position of producer or speaker was occupied by a higher-order signified or meaning.
- (b) In the position of the audience or addressee is the perceptual, rather than the cognitive, apparatus. And within perception, not the ear, not even 'feeling', but the eye is hegemonic. Finally this is, not binocular vision, but the single eye.
- (c) In the position of the text or utterance (or media) is a window, literally stationed between the eye and the referent, along geometric sight lines which connect the eye to the referent.

(2) We don't want to make too hard and fast a distinction between the just-discussed window-on-the-world, or pictorial, realism and narrative realism. For example, both pictorial and narrative realism partake of the same mechanistic cosmology. Yet it makes good analytical sense to hold to such a distinction.

Western and non-Western cultural paradigms differ from one another, not just in terms of their spatio-temporal organization of representations, but also on the count of *what* imparts spatio-temporal organization. Here narrative realism speaks first and foremost the language of scientific causation. This means that causes must be immanent either to everyday life or the cultural object under question, and the cause be prior to effect. This contrasts with Ancient Greek or Christian models of explanation in which causes are transcendent and not necessarily prior to the explanans. Because modernism and especially postmodernism speak the language of contingency rather than that of order, they are less concerned with causation altogether.

Narratives, discourses and myths, for example, signify over a temporal dimension – unlike, say, the word or the statement. The rationality of cause and effect is manifested in realist narrative. Realist cultural forms consist of a caused, logical flow of events, often structured into a beginning, a middle and a closed conclusion. Classical novels have such a format, even if a 'slice of life' from the continuous flow of history is presented. The typical Hollywood film, to take another example, consists of three elements: initial stability, interruption, and movement to new stability and closure (Kuhn 1982: 29). The important point is that for realist texts the narrative is the central organizing principle. In this respect realist forms may be contrasted with those texts that are essentially 'spectacular'. The pleasure of texts involving 'spectacle' lies in the images themselves; it is a visual, not a narrative, pleasure.

Such rationality also applies to what might be thought to be non-narrative cultural forms. Realist photographs and paintings often have a 'before' and 'after' outside the specific moment captured in the frame. They are episodes in a story and imply the rest of the narrative in the nature of their images and the meanings that these construct. The meaning of the picture is given by its place in an implied narrative. Non-realist forms do not imply such a narrative. They do not imply a story so much as invite contemplation, disrupting the flow of everyday life and its 'rational' construction of cause and effect.

(3) The third aspect of realism is the concealment of the production of the cultural form. Realist cultural forms present themselves as already constructed or as a report upon external events. Many realist texts encourage the audience to think that there is no author. That is, as just mentioned, the referent so to speak takes the place of the author. The form conspires to convince us that we are not reading or viewing something that has been constructed in a particular fashion by a determinate producer or set of producers. Even nineteenth-century novels which have an author 'speaking' directly to the readers and which might, hence, imply that the narrative had been constructed in a particular pattern, maintain that events are being *reported upon*. A classic example of this is *Jane Eyre*, with its famous 'Reader: I married him' statement. Even in such novels the author's hand is concealed: the work of the production of the text is simplified or omitted. Reality (as everyday life) is seen to be simply reproduced on the page, film or television screen. Realist forms, in other words, are fictions but do not present themselves as fictions. For many analysts, this characteristic of realism makes the audience

into passive observers. They are not invited into the text, as active participants, because they can see how it is made, but are made to sit back and simply observe an apparently seamless whole; audiences do not do any work on the texts.

Modernism is 'a regime of signification' which, in its privileging of the signifier, does show the author's hand. Modernism in this sense values the formal properties of the aesthetic material. Its focus is on the producer's systematic working through of the possibilities in the aesthetic material, such as Schoenberg's twelve-tone system, or Picasso's facet-planes, or Proust's experiments with time. Thus modernist cultural forms pre-eminently show the author's hand. Postmodernism, on the contrary, is not concerned particularly with the qualities of the aesthetic material. A postmodernist film like Benoit's *Diria* does not reveal the production process like modernist films directed by, for example, Godard. Like realism, a film such as *Diria* brings the viewer right in and 'glues' him or her to the referent; only the referent or the real then turns out to be a chimerical world of simulations.¹ It seems in fact that it is only modernism as a mode of signification which shows the author's hand. Pre-realist and non-Western cultural paradigms also typically conceal the production process.

REALIST AND NON-REALIST CULTURAL FORMS

Realism has been the dominant cultural form for the past 200 years (MacCabe 1981). The initial development of realist conventions in the English novel have been traced by Ian Watt (1963) and the dominant tradition through the nineteenth century was realist. A late example of this form is the work of Trollope, who offers us a view of a particular and complicated world. The narrative is made up of events, often individual occurrences, which are connected in chains of cause and effect and the author's role in the construction of the text is concealed from the reader. Such a tradition has been carried through to the popular fiction of the present day and most thrillers and many science-fiction novels, for example, have such a structure.

Much contemporary television output also follows realist conventions. On our definition dramas such as *Dallas* are clearly realist. *Dallas* presents us a view of a plausible world, even if, as some viewers relate, very unlikely things happen and unusual domestic arrangements are taken for granted (Ang 1985: 34-7). Narrative realism, while dispensing with final causality, must be true to the

Aristotelian tenets of plausibility and predictability. Thus *Dallas* presents a believable world and the narrative links events causally. JR makes things happen to other people, who are often powerless. The construction of *Dallas* is seamless; it is not interrupted by moments of disclosure of the 'artificiality' of the production. It may well be that *Dallas* is a particular type of realism and following Ang's useful study this can be labelled 'emotional realism' (1985: 45), as the aspect of being a 'window on the world' of external events is not as prominent as the other aspects of realism. The world presented may therefore be less plausible than that constructed in documentary-influenced drama such as the British working-class soap opera *Coronation Street* (Longhurst 1987: 633-49). However, *Dallas* is still realist, albeit at the melodramatic end of the realist spectrum: a position corresponding to that of writers like the Brontës or Dickens in nineteenth-century realist fiction.

Certain forms of television which might be thought to be 'fantastic' or 'fantasy' are in our terms realist. For example, by our definition, the British science-fiction series *Dr Who* (Fiske 1983: 14-15; Tulloch and Alworado 1983) and the space-travel drama *Star Trek* are realist. Despite not being directly concerned with 'our' world (though in both cases the action often takes place on Earth at some time in the past or the future), the worlds that are a setting for the action and which are constructed through the narrative are plausible in the terms of everyday life. Even the irrational or the strange is still explicable in quasi-scientific or everyday terms. Indeed, the science in such forms is often closer to our imagined view of the nature of science than its reality. This parallels the use made of science and technology in James Bond films and books (Zorzi 1966). Realism, then, cuts across the genres of TV, cinema and literature: soap operas, police series, thrillers, adventure stories and science fiction are all realist.

Modernism can be defined by contrasting it with realism. Modernism does not depict a plausible everyday world in the manner of realism: the world is often strange or fragmented. There is a break with mechanism, scientific discourse. The narrative is less concerned with a beginning, a middle and an end; it often becomes episodic and 'difficult'. The consequence is that the production and authorship of the text are foregrounded rather than concealed. There is a preoccupation with the role of the artist and form; authorship becomes artistically important in its own right rather than simply a means of representing 'reality'. Postmodernism, developing out of the critique of modernism begun by the 1920s and 1930s avant-garde, criticizes modernism's concern with high culture (see e.g.

'larger-than-life' characters. There is thus a departure from privileging the referent and instead portraying a world of idealized characters or 'signifieds'.

Similarly, the neoclassical painting of David for example, would be non-realist to the extent that it portrays a shadow and ideal world, though a rather different shadow and ideal world than that portrayed in monumentalist and poly-centred (as distinct from being determined by a single principle) baroque productions. Romanticism departs from realist canons in both pre-realist and modernist directions. Romanticism, insofar as it hypostatizes 'nature' as a shadow world, is pre-realist, as is the idealization in, for example, Richard Strauss of the nation or 'the hero'. On the other hand, romanticism partakes in the Kantian revolution's problematization of the subject, and in its development of the subjective mode; this is particularly apparent in, for example, El Greco and Wagner. It is a precursor, to this extent, of modernist movements like expressionism or the work of Kafka.

If the melodrama and emotionalism of, for example, *Dallas* and mainstream Hollywood cinema of, say, the 1950s, while being realist, depart from realist canons in a pre-realist direction through their privileging of the signified, then naturalism and documentary realism tend to depart from realism in a post-realist or modernist direction. Naturalism, rather differently from the realist ideal-type, refers to the simple reproduction of what we perceive. Realism *can* involve naturalistic images but it does not have to, if only because the construction of a plausible world must involve selection from the array of perceived images. Indeed naturalism can be pushed so far that it becomes positively unrealistic; for example, some documentary-influenced films break with realism due to the sheer weight of everyday life that they attempt to portray. To show too much of the everyday, too much detail, paradoxically tends to disrupt realist convention. An example of this genre is Chantal Akerman's film *Jean Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (see Kuhn 1982).

The realist view of causation and rationality is connected to the rise of the mechanistic scientific outlook in contemporary Western societies. In the familiar conception of science, events are observable and connected through cause and effect. This view of science has become pervasive in Western society and its connection with realism in culture is of fundamental importance (Williams 1977a, b). The connection is further illustrated by the way in which the growth of non-realist artistic forms in Western culture, such as modernism, have coincided with the breakdown of 'mechanistic' accounts of

nature, as exemplified by the non-Newtonian physics of the early part of this century (Forman 1971). Naturalism is most often associated with the paintings of Courbet and Zola's novels. But the documentary style of British film makers of the 1950s and 1960s also was naturalistic, as has been much of British soap opera. Where naturalism is the most realist of realisms (according to our ideal-type) is in the portrayal of characters. Ordinary working-class types are portrayed in everyday life situations ('kitchen sinks') in a break with the idealization (privilege of the signified) in, say, Hollywood melodrama. But in naturalism lies the contradiction inherent in realism itself. This contradiction is that the pursuit of the real to its furthest and logical extent breaks with realist canons themselves and slides over into modernism. What naturalism begins not to do is to portray life as a seamless web of cause and effect. Instead a lot of room is made for *contingency*. This contingency is both temporal and spatial. Temporally, for example Chantal Akerman explicitly refuses to make her narratives move along. Spatially Robert Altman, in some of his films such as *Nashville*, refuses to give the spectator a single viewpoint from which he or she can see the screen as a coherent whole. Instead several conversations will be taking place at the same time. In this sense some critics have referred to Joyce's supremely modernist *Ulysses* as 'naturalist', in its stream-of-consciousness writing; stream of consciousness here is not a matter of causes and effects in some sort of logical sequence, but, like free association, is much more contingent. Or critics have referred to the famous market scene in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* as naturalist. Here Flaubert builds in contingency by refusing to give the reader a single viewpoint as a group of scenes are going on in a sort of senseless babble in the market at the same time.

This leads to our point above about cultural conflict. The point is that non-realist cultural paradigms will make use of a realist aesthetic discourse to argue for the validity of these paradigms. To make an argument via realist aesthetic discourse is to argue that a given cultural form corresponds better to reality, or to 'the referent' than does another cultural form. This would be an argument for the justification of, say, classic realist nineteenth-century novels or of twentieth-century films or TV shows. But, as suggested above, realist aesthetic discourse has been used to legitimate supremely modernist (thus non-realist) cultural texts such as Joyce's *Ulysses*. The argument here would be that stream of consciousness corresponds better to reality as we perceive it than the ordered classic realist text. Other cultural forms such as punk music and clothing styles with their break with harmony and an ordered aesthetic of beauty for an

aesthetic of contingency, rawness and ugliness are clearly miles away from classic realism. Yet proponents of punk argue that their cultural objects are a lot truer to lived reality than, say, the more harmonically ordered rock music – or, say, classic popular culture realist narratives. The same is true of surrealism. Surrealist paintings and films typically manifest the displacement and condensation that characterize Freudian primary process. Yet surrealists have argued that indeed the Freudian primary process is at the very basis of reality.

Marxists too have a particularly realist aesthetic discourse. Analysts such as Derrida and his followers have often implied that orthodox Marxism, much like Christianity, is only a reconstructed neo-Platonism in its privileging of a sort of 'transcendental signified'. The critics of Marxism have made a fundamental mistake in this claim. When Marxists argue that there is more basic reality behind the often ideologically tinged surface reality, this more basic reality has nothing to do with the ideal conceptions of forms, that is, of signifieds, of Christianity and of Platonism. Marxism's claims have little to do with signifieds. Instead Marxist aesthetic (and theoretical) discourse is about *referents*. Its claims are that the true referent lies beneath the apparent referent. And it favours aesthetic forms which somehow show this true referent. Hence the social realism that orthodox Marxism endorses differs in its conception of the referent from classic realist texts, which are seen to be bourgeois to the extent that the social ordering they portray is only a surface social ordering. The same sort of realist aesthetic discourse (only the connections are more highly mediated) has been used to justify Marxist modernist cultural objects, such as Brecht's plays and Godard's films. The Brechtian and Godardian strategies of distancing point, as we noted above, to a different reality than the superficially perceived one, and in particular the superficial reality portrayed in classic realist texts.

TOWARDS A HISTORICAL SOCIOLOGY OF CULTURAL PARADIGMS

In the first two sections of this chapter we have worked, largely via illustrations, towards a definition of realism. We have argued that realist cultural forms are characterized by a specific organization of space, by specific organization of time, in realist narrative; and by the concealment of the production process of cultural objects. We have delineated an ideal type of cultural realism, which in addition to

the just-mentioned characteristics is also a specific 'regime of signification'. All regimes of signification involve specific relationships between signifier, signified and referent. We have argued that realism privileges the referent and – unlike postmodernism – assumes that referent and signifier are in their proper places. We have shown how realism in its ideal-typical form almost never exists, and how realist cultural objects almost always have some modernist, postmodernist, or even more importantly pre-modern and pre-realist characteristics. We have finally argued that even the non-realist cultural forms are often backed up by a realist aesthetic discourse. This type of aesthetic discourse is only prevalent in modernity. Prior to modernity aesthetic discourses attributed validity to cultural objects, not insofar as they corresponded to the real world but insofar as they corresponded to an ideal world.

In the third section of the chapter we shall begin to outline a historical sociology of culture, which largely derives its structure from the 'ontologies' that producer and receiver groups hold. Very often the ontologies that producer groups hold are 'ahead' of those that receiver groups hold. In such cases it makes sense to speak of 'avant-gardes'. And among reception groups the ontologies of elites is often ahead of those of the masses. What we propose is a sort of 'trickle-down' theory of both cultural forms and ontologies from producers to elites to the masses.

In outline it goes like this. Prior to the full development of industrial capitalism, high and folk cultures were almost completely separated. Folk culture was associated with the rural life of lower-class groupings. The stories that were repeated orally in such cultures are predominantly non-realist. In folk cultures that continue to exist in the contemporary world such tales still often take the supernatural or otherworldly as their subject-matter. Events here do not take place in a recognizable, everyday world, and the narratives are not structured by cause and effect. A strong moral message may also be present. These folk cultures are also 'celebratory' rather than 'serious' and are removed from realist high culture, associated with the dominant classes of the early nineteenth century.

In many ways this realist high culture should be seen as the popular culture of the literate population. It is exemplified by the classical European tradition of oil-painting and the realist novel. Such novels often describe a particular sector of society and the interactions that take place within it; that is within the confines of a knowable community in Williams's terms (1970; 1975). The relationships between the characters (who are often of one social class) are knowable (even though there may be hidden depths that are

revealed in the course of the narrative) and the outcomes of actions are predictable. The treatment of non-bourgeois characters is less socially grounded and the depictions of Adam Bede and Felix Holt illustrate later difficulties.

In many respects, what we have called folk and high culture are, at this point, examples of what Jameson calls 'popular' or 'folk art'. This was 'in fact the "organic" expression of so many distinct social communities or castes, such as the peasant village, the court, the medieval town, the polis and even the classical bourgeoisie when it was still a unified social group with its own cultural specificity' (Jameson 1979: 134). Jameson's point is particularly important as it shows how, while being different in form, both high and folk cultures are produced in relative isolation. There is little of the tension or antagonism between these different cultural forms that is manifested in the twentieth century.

As the nineteenth century progressed several cultural changes took place, within both high and folk culture. Folk culture was transformed by a variety of forces into a mass-produced popular culture. For example, 'performance' gradually became less important to this popular culture, though still present in forms such as music hall and vaudeville, which acted as a link between the older, oral tradition of folk culture and the new mechanically reproduced and realist forms of radio, cinema, phonograph and popular song.

This reception of realist cultural forms was conditioned by changes in both high and popular ontologies. Key here was acceptance of secularization and the acceptance of the assumptions of Galilean and Newtonian physics. This of course conditioned the existence of an audience among elites for Renaissance painting and the nineteenth-century novel. The 'masses', however, continued to consume pre-realist cultural forms until a much later date. This is partly because of their much later acceptance of a secularized ontology. Thus the consumption of realist forms by the masses is at the same time the birth of popular (as distinct from folk) culture.

Further, it is about the same time (late nineteenth century) that popular culture was born, and realist cultural forms consumed on a large scale. And of course this coincided with the rapid development of the working class. At the same time high culture, split as it were into two. It split into, on the one hand, a continuing but backward-looking realist high culture, as manifested in the continuing popularity of non-experimental forms of 'classical music' and representational art; and, on the other hand, modernism, which is non-realist. Not only was modernism anti-realist in form, but, in addition, many of its practitioners deliberately and consciously criti-

cized the previous modes of artistic expression. This phase arguably became progressively stabilized between the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries.

There are two levels to the explanation of these shifts: 'internal' cultural change and wider social processes. As we have noted, popular culture appears with the relative decline of oral transmission of culture and of performance. As popular culture develops this process becomes clearer, with the establishment of cultural reproduction by mechanical means. This makes cultural transmission from one group to another more likely. It facilitates a process in which popular culture effectively borrows from the realism of high culture. The transformation and divergence in high culture can be related initially to the creation of an artistic avant-garde which separates itself from the rest of the elite social classes. In the competition for resources and prestige, these groups begin to challenge the dominance of realism. Realism is the dominant cultural form and hence is the site for struggle over scarce artistic resources. The avant-garde differentiates itself from the other producers of high culture at this point, through the attack on conventional, dominant forms of realism. In later periods the 'innovative' edge of dominant culture will similarly attack the convention of modernist culture.

As far as the movement in working-class culture from folk to popular forms is concerned, some theorists would explain the change by the *imposition* of commodification and massification. This suggests that the working-class group is passive, their culture changed by manipulation to which they accede in a relatively straightforward fashion. Although there may be something in such an explanation, it is necessary, in addition, to consider how the culture expressed by working-class groups relates to the situation in which they find themselves. Culture is not simply imposed on dominated groups from above, but is always, at least partly, a response to dominant cultural forms and to such groups' social locations (see e.g. Clarke et al. 1981). Such responses need not always be 'resistances', but can be seen as having various political dimensions and consequences, some of which will often be contradictory. Bourgeois groups also respond to their changed social location. The new developments in capitalism will impinge on culturally and economically dominant groups, creating social divisions of various kinds. It is important that Bourdieu (1984) is suggestive in this respect. It is clear, for example, that upper-class writers respond to economic and political change in different ways (see e.g. Williams 1963).

In the widest terms the explanations of these cultural changes lie in

the movements of industrial and urban capitalism. In the period 1840-1940 a new industrial working class is established. In addition, cultural commodification penetrates all sections of society (Jameson 1979). As the working class moves into the new cities, there is a gradual loss of the established forms of a collective and folk culture. The working class were previously relatively separated from other social classes and the possibility of cultural communication was slight. Their social position was familiar, and particular patterns of work and behaviour were established. Of course, these did not change immediately with the coming of industrialization and population migration, and in this respect it is important to consider the mediating effect of the continuing development of the capitalist/bourgeois city.

From the 1980s work in cultural studies has addressed the vitally important question of the effect of city redevelopment and change upon cultural life (see e.g. Berman 1982). Such work is important, as it provides evidence about a linking mechanism between the structural processes involved in the development of industrial capitalism (and patriarchy) and specific forms of cultural expression. Thus T. J. Clark (1985) relates impressionism to change in the nature of the city, alterations in class relations and hence to the development of the capitalist economic system. Clark's argument can be summarized as follows. The changing nature of Paris and its development by Haussmann were the product of class struggle, itself related to the movement of capitalism. Haussmannization was not a unified, one-way process, but was itself subject to struggle. The texts of impressionism were a product of these movements, ushering in modern life in Paris. They often contain a contradictory critique of modernity, and the changing nature of the city and class relations. Such a critique is often implicit and a good number of the paintings depict the outskirts of Paris and the areas of (especially) petty bourgeois leisure, thus relating to the changing nature of class relations and the development of urbanism.

The general framework and the fine detail contained in Clark's book are stimulating. He suggests that realism in popular culture can provide a base for the criticism of the existing social order. The depiction of what exists in the creation of a rational narrative accords a degree of objectivity to the world. Once the nature of a world is clarified its criticism becomes possible. Realism does not simply accommodate to the existing order, as events will be depicted which might otherwise have been concealed.

Realism in popular culture can also play a compensatory role, acting as a guide to the nature of the social structure and describing

the relatively new situation that working-class people found themselves in. This is not a static situation and culture obviously undergoes changes in the course of a long-run development. The changes in the industrial process and consequently in the structure of the city may lead to a breakdown of the relative certainty and rhythms of previous existence. For example, Clark describes how the transformation of Paris broke up the established working-class life (1985: 30-78). One of the ways of compensating for this is to develop a cultural form depicting a relatively solid and predictable world. Such a world would not be chaotic but rational. It would in a sense be a 'knowable community' compensating for the confusion and unknowability of everyday life.

Much modernism in art relates to the development of the city. The increased pace of change produces a need to explain and criticize the nature of society. For those working within high culture the only way of doing this was with new artistic forms. The old ways could not cope. Modernism has a critical edge which is represented in an attempt to go beyond realism to depict the 'true' reality beneath the surface appearance. Realism is criticized as an inadequate instrument and much modernist work seeks to pass beyond the depiction of an everyday or plausible world, to produce deeper insights, expose the true meaning or irrationality of life and sometimes to show how life should be ordered. Modernism can also act as compensation. As the clarity of life is disrupted, modernism attempts to produce a new order or new certainty. If this is not possible, it may shift its focus away from the centres of dislocation, or show the places where change is taking place in a particular light.

In the period between the two World Wars the relationships between realist high culture and the non-realist modernism of avant-gardes became especially antagonistic, as did those between the latter and realist popular culture. These different forms of culture became increasingly addressed to one another and critical of each other's mode of expression. Now cultural forms were no longer separated and non-antagonistic. These cultural struggles and conflicts were, of course, related to actual political and economic conflicts.

So far we have speculated that culture in the early part of the nineteenth century consisted of realist high and non-realist folk forms, which were not antagonistic. These were transformed during a transition period driven by changes in the nature of capitalism manifested in the alteration of the city. Another phase is then reached where there is a realist high culture, a modernist avant-garde and realist popular culture which are relatively antagonistic to one another. This formation is relatively stabilized between 1880 and

1945. Developments since World War II have ushered in a new phase and it is to this that we now turn.

In the post-war period realist high culture continues to exist, even though it has been affected by modernism to a limited extent. Modernism itself has been challenged by a new, postmodernist, avant-garde. Postmodernism is non-realist and often less directly critical than modernism. Realism, as manifested in best-selling novels and 'soap opera', for example, is still dominant in popular culture. However, perhaps the most significant development in this period is the degree of fusion that has taken place between the postmodernist avant-garde operating within the framework of high culture and the avant-garde of popular culture, which is also essentially postmodernist. This fusion between high and popular culture is most noticeable in pop music.

Pop music contains elements of realism, modernism and postmodernism. Like other forms, it is a site of cultural struggle and antagonism. At different points groups in struggle will draw upon different resources and political positions. In mid-1970s Britain, for example, the decay of critical, 'modernist' rock music (initiated by the popular culture avant-garde of the 1960s) into an over-concern with form was criticized from realist and postmodernist directions in punk.

In some respects this development entailed a return to realism. A plausible world was addressed, the songs were narratives, and they sought to be transparent and simple. Construction and complexity were disguised. The early work of The Ramones is realist in many of these ways. The songs were short, realist stories performed at manic speed; contrivance was ostensibly covered up. The early work of the major British punk bands, such as The Sex Pistols, The Clash and The Jam, was similar.

The fusion between high and popular culture in rock music has happened at various times. Examples of this are the association of The Grateful Dead with Ken Kesey in the mid-sixties on the West Coast of the US; the cooperation of The Velvet Underground (which itself fused high and popular culture elements) with Andy Warhol; David Bowie's connections with the same circle on the US East Coast; and latterly the work of The Clash with Allen Ginsburg in the 1980s.

A few concluding speculations. Realism still dominates high culture despite the influence of modernism. Most popular culture also continues to be realist. Between these forms there is a certain merging of the avant-garde of high culture which, in a process of struggle, has moved away from modernist to postmodernist forms, and the

cutting edge of popular culture, which is itself experimenting with non-realist forms akin to modernism and postmodernism in high culture. The relationships between these forms are less antagonistic than in previous periods. While there are still criticisms of popular culture and its 'mass' effects, their vehemence has decreased. For example, there is less concern about the Americanization of British culture which worried commentators in the 1950s (see e.g. Hoggart 1957/1969). The distinction between high and popular culture has become less salient. Popular culture is respectable. It is important to consider the social determinants of these developments and the current situation.

Again, these developments can be related to changes in the structure of society. We may arguably be now living in a period of 'late' or 'disorganized' capitalism (Lash and Urry 1987). Age, gender and race have become increasingly important as nodes of social and cultural struggle, and class relations have become more complex. These developments have intensified since the 1960s. Youth, for example, is important in the confluence of high and popular culture in pop music that we have described above. The construction of a period of adolescence and the 'teenager' are important characteristics of this period. As Martin (1981) has argued, these can provide a period of 'liminality', where the structured routines of everyday social and cultural life are broken down. It is in this period that the concern with style and spectacle that we have identified as non-realist moments within popular culture become particularly important. Such a period or form of life was common among the avant-garde bourgeois groups engaging in artistic experiment, and it is here that cultural fusion occurs. The emphasis on youth and youth culture has therefore produced a degree of cultural homogenization, although its extent must not be overstressed.

We have now come full circle back to the issue of popular and high ontology, through which these changes can be understood. The reception of modernist cultural forms among elites has largely been conditioned by changes in ontology and in particular changes in perceptions, in the experience of time and space. Two important changes of such space-time ontology were the influence of post-Newtonian physics and urbanization. Post-Newtonian physics fosters an ontology of a less ordered and more contingent view of time and space, as does the experience of the city. Time is here disordered because of experiences with travel. Space takes on an extraordinary plurality and intensity of succession of impressions in comparison with the stability of earlier village life. Thus an audience is created for the reception of cultural forms (modernist forms) which are

disordered, made more contingent or at least differently structured. The development of television stands in a similar relationship to the reception of postmodernist forms. Now popular ontology is characterized by a surfeit of images, in which large chunks of everyday life are comprised of images. A new ontology in which reality and image are so intertwined and often even confused predisposes an audience to the reception of cultural forms which problematize the relationship between signifier and referent. The difference is that this creation of an audience for postmodern culture develops among elites and masses at about the same time. This may be partly because there are similar shifts in both high and popular ontology.

Thus, *après le postmoderne*, realism continues to be of the utmost significance. First, because a great portion of high and popular culture texts continue to exemplify classic realism. But perhaps even more importantly because realist ontologies condition the reception even of modernist and postmodernist cultural forms. To be sure, these popular ontologies presuppose a different, and far more contingent, even cynical, vision of what is real than did their nineteenth-century counterparts. And to be sure, much of turn-of-the-twenty-first-century realist culture will be of a qualitatively more 'pure', disharmonic nature than its predecessors. The new realist culture may indeed be cast in a mould that is neither semiotic, nor mimetic, but starkly *indexical* in coloration. Yet, this said, realist cultural forms will persist. And those who will increasingly consume modernist and postmodernist culture will do so for realist reasons. Critics of the twenty-first century, then, will be well advised once again to take realism seriously.

NOTES

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1 See Peter Bürger in ch. 4 of this book.

2 See parallel discussion by Peter Bürger in ch. 4 of this book.

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6

Popular culture and the construction of postmodern identities

Douglas Kellner

According to anthropological folklore, in traditional societies, one's identity was fixed, solid, and stable. Identity was a function of predefined social roles and a traditional system of myths which provided orientation and religious sanctions to one's place in the world, while rigorously circumscribing the realm of thought and behaviour. One was born and died a member of one's clan, a member of a fixed kinship system, and a member of one's tribe or group with one's life trajectory fixed in advance. In pre-modern societies, identity was unproblematical and not subject to reflection or discussion. Individuals did not undergo identity crises, or radically modify their identity. One was a hunter and a member of the tribe and that was that.

In modernity, identity becomes more mobile, multiple, personal, self-reflexive, and subject to change and innovation. Yet identity in modernity is also social and Other-related. Theorists of identity in modernity, from Hegel through G. H. Mead, have often characterized identity in terms of mutual recognition, as if one's identity depended on recognition from others combined with self-validation of this recognition. Yet the forms of identity in modernity are also relatively substantial and fixed; identity still comes from a circumscribed set of roles and norms: one is a mother, a son, a Texan, a Scot, a professor, a socialist, a Catholic, a lesbian – or rather a combination of these social roles and possibilities. Identities are thus still relatively circumscribed, fixed, and limited, though the boundaries of possible identities, of new identities, are continually expanding.

Indeed, in modernity, self-consciousness comes into its own; one engages in reflection on available social roles and possibilities