
In a recent remixing collaboration with another electronic composer, I proposed exchanging chunks of recorded sound selected only from “popular” musical sources. I assumed at the time that we would find appropriate material from within our own record collections. In the end we each opted to tune in to the radio to find the “pop” sounds we were looking for. The question arose—what is the most authentic source when attempting to investigate elements of pop culture? How does one go about identifying one source over another without arbitrarily isolating phenomena that are inherently multi-sited, temporarily volatile as well as uniquely dependent upon our distracted postmodern attention for their designation as “popular”?

For Henry Jenkins, Tara McPherson, and Jane Shattuc, any thoughtful attempt to answer such questions must start with an investigation into the meaning of “popular culture.” This necessity prompts them to introduce their diverse collection of essays on the “politics and pleasures of popular culture” by pointing out some of the historical sources that have shaped our understanding of the term—tracing its use within “Romanticism, industrialization, Marxism, [the Frankfurt School], American conglomerate culture, and identity politics” (p. 27). This contradictory history is framed by the editors as a backdrop to the emergent perspectives on popular culture brought together in the book, wherein the “specific contexts of reception,” “the social positions” of the authors, and the particularities of the forms they adopt as researchers and writers are manifest in the writings themselves (p. 41).

This openness regarding the historical, social, and formal contexts of research is conceived as acknowledging the partialness of any singular view offered upon cultural artifacts or practices. The humility involved in such self-reflexive writing (often resulting in very personal forms of expression) is but one of the common elements the editors use to link these works as part of a “new cultural studies,” a manifesto for which makes up the second half of the book’s introduction. A call to arms, it beckons all like-minded thinkers to engage in a cultural studies that can assume the immediacy and vibrancy of its objects of study, that can draw productively on models from vernacular theory and fan criticism, and that can claim new freedoms in the ways it engages with the political. In the end, we know that writing and reading cultural theory is serious work. We also hope it might be fun. (p. 6)

What follows this introduction are 36 varied investigations, organized under the keyword headings Self, Maker, Performance, Taste, Change, Home, and Emotion. And indeed the experience of looking through these essays is not unlike flipping through the (AM) radio dial, with conversation-starting topics as diverse as tips on Marxism and thrift-store shopping (Matthew Tinkom, Joy Van Faqua, Amy Vallarejo), young girls and video cabs (Gerry Bloustien), adult masculinity and baseball card collecting (John Bloom), ethnicity and being Klingon (Peter A. Chvany), watching wrestlers as a woman academic (Sharon Mazer), watching soaps as a mother and academic (Elayne Rapping), watching American TV as a Canadian (Aniko Bodroghkozy), being an academic on talk shows who writes about experts on talk shows (Jane Shattuc), being queer and watching The Wizard of Oz (Alexander Doty), digital recording and lo-fidelity (Tony Grajeda), or learning to read propaganda and Dr. Seuss (Henry Jenkins). The book’s densely packed 750 pages almost necessitates sampling and selective reading. An enormous variety of “popular” subject matter is discussed, often in rather light-hearted and entertaining ways, making this volume an excellent source of thoughtful quotations about topics not addressed in many academic contexts. “There’s something for everyone!” in this book, without a doubt. That said,
readers will inevitably be disappointed with what is not there, i.e., one’s own unique pop interests and perspectives. In my case, I lament the lack of essays addressing what I would describe as pop music—that is, the latest music on the radio. Which brings up another point: the book seems to have taken some time in being published, spoiling some of the “freshness” of its components. In many cases examples feel dated.

But what about our determinations as to the sources of the popular culture we seek to study? Is it enough to assert that our interests outside of academic or scientific frameworks are popular simply because we were introduced to them by the TV, cinema, radio, our friends, our community—and not our professors? And what happens to our objects of curiosity when we take them up and attempt to turn them into subjects of career-defining research? As one contributor notes, “[M]y scholar/ writer’s authority frames and contains, objectifies and abstracts, and above all extracts and constructs a narrative that supersedes that of the wrestlers [her research subjects] no matter how articulate and self-possessed they are, no matter how proximate their world may be to mine” (Sharon Mazer, p. 277).

Our affections as fans of popular culture risk enframing our research into subjective narratives that end up revealing more about us than our field of inquiry. Although this phenomenon is certainly not limited to cultural studies, the creative mechanisms developed by the latter to accommodate this reality are particularly well displayed within Hop on Pop. The two-part question of how to define a piece of popular culture and how then to write about it deeply concerns many of the work’s contributors and shapes their essays—sometimes in startling ways. (The best example of this closes the book—a perfectly interwoven combination of academic treatise, personal diary entry, and horror-story prose entitled “Introducing Horror” [Weisl, pp. 700-719].) The emergent scholarly approach that Hop on Pop’s editors ascribe to the volume’s contributors possesses six putative tendencies (described as “family resemblances”) that address questions of authenticity with regards to research in the realm of popular culture:

1. to embrace immediacy as opposed to maintaining “the ideal of a rational, political, emotional or ‘objective’ distance” (p. 6);
2. to accept many-sided or multivalent perspectives within academic writing;
3. to seek “to translate critical insights about popular culture back into popular practice” (p. 12) as a question of accessibility;
4. to favour the particular over the general (“Details matter” [p. 14] (italics in original));
5. to pursue contextualist over structuralist explanations of popular phenomena; and
6. to endorse situated over a priori facts.

In conclusion, however, while I would applaud the editors of Hop on Pop for working toward making pop-cultural studies “seriously fun” by putting together such a large and varied collection, the breathlessness that accompanies their bold pronouncements regarding “a new cultural studies” feels forced. Although many readers might agree with the six tendencies outlined above, drawing them up into a manifesto, no matter how open-ended and respectfully submitted, comes across as rather disingenuous given the subject matter. Moreover, I did not find these insights particularly helpful when reading the compiled essays themselves, which are much more interesting when approached on their own as unique and highly personalized investigations and not as flag-bearers for a new research era in cultural studies. I’d suggest tuning in, rather than hopping on board.

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