Chapter 7
Disciplining Cultural Studies

INTRODUCTION

As we noted in Chapter 1, the 1960s saw the formation of an academic discipline known as cultural studies, of which the study of popular culture was a major component. In this chapter we’ll discuss the formation of two of the major schools of what came to be known as cultural studies. We’ll investigate the ways they use the earlier theories we’ve discussed, how they transform those theories, and the precise ways in which cultural studies came to view popular culture. Named after the locations in which they began, these two schools of thought are known as the Frankfurt School and the Birmingham School. While these schools are often seen as the primary origins of popular culture studies, we would be remiss not to turn to another massively significant figure in the field, Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan, whose work on the forms of media has similarly influenced much current study; this chapter therefore uses McLuhan, in part, as a bridge between the two other theoretical camps. In subsequent chapters, we will see how these early disciplinary methods have, in turn, changed from the later twentieth century through to today.

THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL

In some ways, the theorists of the Frankfurt School should be included in Chapter 6. Like Louis Althusser, the thinkers associated with this group grew out of a primarily Marxist background, but attempted to rearticulate Marxist conclusions and methodologies in light of new discoveries in psychoanalysis, philosophy, social science, and so on. Unlike Althusser, however, the members of the Frankfurt School were much more interested in the critical analysis of mass culture, which ties them more clearly to the academic, disciplinary study of culture.

The term Frankfurt School refers primarily to a group of scholars who worked at the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt am Main, Germany, founded in 1923. Primarily associated with some of its earliest members, including Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, and Walter Benjamin, the Institute moved to New York’s Columbia University in 1935 owing to the rise of Nazism in Germany. The Institute, now back in Germany, is still running today.
While later members of the Institute—even those who moved away to a greater or lesser degree from its founding Marxist principles (including such famous theorists as Jürgen Habermas)—are occasionally referred to as belonging to the Frankfurt School, the term generally serves now to identify that group of theorists from its opening decades, most of whom understood popular and mass culture from a Marxist perspective. They saw popular culture as a means of creating the consent of the populace to social structures, even when those structures are not in an individual’s or group’s own interest. The critical practice they developed is often referred to by the (somewhat too general) term critical theory.

Popular Culture as Culture Industry: Adorno and Horkheimer

Perhaps the best known of the members of the Frankfurt School—and the two whose arguments are most often used to represent it—are Theodor Adorno (1903–1969) and Max Horkheimer (1895–1973). Their study, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, along with Adorno’s separate essays, analyzed what they called the culture industry. This analysis still frames much of the work being done today in popular culture studies. Starting from a Marxist perspective, they point out that popular culture in the twentieth century is mass produced by an entertainment industry. So, unlike the high artistic productions of the individual genius, mass culture is much more subject to the ideological structures of production and class relations. In other words, the objects of mass culture must fit within the larger hegemonic structure of society, and serve a larger social purpose in maintaining that society. Whereas for Marx religion was the “opiate of the masses,” for Adorno and Horkheimer that role was taken over by television.

In both his larger body of work and in his collaboration with Horkheimer, Adorno continually lamented the decreasing freedom that aesthetics, or the beautiful in art, had from the marketplace. The Romantic poets and artists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and many of their descendants in the centuries thereafter, saw art as a means of going beyond the concerns of the daily world and finding transcendent truths (much as Plato saw as possible through philosophy). As John Keats wrote in his poem “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” “Beauty is truth, truth beauty,” meaning that art can offer people a truth not sullied by the material world. Works of genius were also seen as necessarily unique and unreproducible.

But Adorno, looking at his cultural surroundings in industrial Germany (and at the rise of Hitler and fascism in that country), saw a world where aesthetic beauty and truth were no longer possible. One of Adorno’s more famous statements was his proclamation that “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (Adorno, 1983, p. 34). This often-repeated line can mean, on the one hand, that beauty is impossible in a world that has experienced the evils of the Holocaust. On the other hand, Adorno frames this memorable statement within his larger critique of mass culture. He saw the entirety of modern popular culture as barbarous, and as helping to create social climates in which terrors like fascist Germany could arise. Beyond those extremes, however, he also saw popular culture as simply flattening the social
and cultural spheres, stripping the world of the possibility for larger truths like the ones Keats found in poetry. "Traditional culture," Adorno writes, "has become worthless today . . . , its heritage . . . expendable to the highest degree, superfluous, trash. And the hucksters of mass culture can point to it with a grin, for they treat it as such" (p. 34). Mass culture strips everything to the lowest common denominator, making all culture homogeneous and supportive of the status quo rather than unique and possibly challenging.

The Culture Industry  To clarify their vision of popular culture, Adorno and Horkheimer coined the term culture industry. In his essay “Culture Industry Reconsidered,” Adorno later wrote,

The term culture industry was perhaps used for the first time in the book Dialectic of Enlightenment. . . . In our drafts we spoke of “mass culture.” We replaced that expression with “culture industry” in order to exclude from the outset the interpretation agreeable to its advocates: that it is a matter of something like a culture that arises spontaneously from the masses themselves, the contemporary form of popular art. From the latter the culture industry must be distinguished in the extreme. The culture industry fuses the old and familiar into a new quality. In all its branches, products which are tailored for consumption by masses, and which to a great extent determine the nature of that consumption, are manufactured more or less according to plan. (Adorno, 2001, p. 98)

The culture industry’s creations originate with a few large corporations and capitalist interests; their products are uniform and serve primarily to turn their audiences into a uniform mass of consumers. The primary goal of the culture industry is thus not to educate or entertain but rather to make money—and it must continually reproduce itself, in a homogeneous form, in order to do so. “Culture now impresses the same stamp on everything,” Adorno and Horkheimer write, such that “Films, radio and magazines make up a system which is uniform as a whole and in every part. Even the aesthetic activities of political opposites are one in their enthusiastic obedience to the rhythm of the iron system” (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1994, p. 120).

Even beyond this claim, they argue that the culture industry serves only to reduce thought altogether, to turn culture into an endless creation of an unthinking mass population bent only on buying more products: “The culture industry turns into public relations, the manufacturing of ‘goodwill’ per se, without regard for particular firms or saleable objects. Brought to bear is a general uncritical consensus, advertisements produced for the world, so that each product of the culture industry becomes its own advertisement” (Adorno, 2001, p. 100). The true function of mass culture is to flatten all meanings and to create the consent of the populace. In the process, it makes all cultural and material objects the equivalent of each other: films are no different from paintings are no different from comic books are no different from sinks or toilets. Everything must become a consumer object—including the consumers themselves.

This flattening of culture also results in popular culture’s repetition of certain “conformist” messages. These messages may have existed in earlier forms of popular culture, Adorno and Horkheimer argue, but they become even starker and more simplistic in the
products of the culture industry, which are only ever imitations of each other: “In the culture industry this imitation finally becomes absolute. Having ceased to be anything but style, it reveals the latter’s secret: obedience to the social hierarchy” (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1994, p. 131). While older forms of popular culture may have been equally conservative in their messages, Adorno and Horkheimer argue, still those earlier forms presented the possibility of a resistance to those norms. In the modern culture industry, there is no debate. Adorno goes on to argue that this message is repeated so often that even those conservative values are emptied of meaning: they are no longer values that should be followed; they are instead presented as necessary controls, without which the world would fall into chaos, as if “people would really follow their instinctual urges and conscious insights unless continuously reassured from outside that they must not do so” (Adorno, 2001, p. 164).

Adorno uses an example from the popular television of his day to prove the importance of the hidden, conservative messages of popular culture:

[T]he heroine of an extremely light comedy of pranks is a young schoolteacher who is not only underpaid but is incessantly fined by the caricature of a pompous and authoritarian school principal. Thus, she has no money for her meals and is actually starving. The supposedly funny situations consist mostly of her trying to hustle a meal from various acquaintances, but regularly without success. ... The script does not try to “sell” any idea. The “hidden meaning” emerges simply by the way the story looks at human beings. ... In terms of a set pattern of identification, the script implies: “If you are as humorous, good-natured, quick-witted, and charming as she is, do not worry about being paid a starvation wage. You can cope with your frustration in a humorous way; and your superior wit and cleverness put you not only above material privations, but also above the rest of mankind.” In other words, the script is a shrewd method of promoting adjustment to humiliating conditions by presenting them as objectively comical and by giving a picture of a person who experiences even her own inadequate position as an object of fun apparently free of any resentment. (pp. 166–67)

A “light show,” presented as “simple entertainment,” seems at first to suggest an individual’s ability to resist authority. But instead, Adorno argues, it implicitly tells us that our anti-authoritarian feelings are “enough,” that we don’t need to try to change an unfair system because we know we’re better than it. No matter how poorly teachers are paid, they don’t need to strike for higher wages, because, with the “right attitude,” they can be happy. This is the effect of the culture industry: “don’t worry; be happy.”

### Resisting Television

One might be tempted to point out, contrary to Adorno’s example of the TV comedy, that some popular culture, including television, seems to resist dominant ideologies: that there are rebellious shows that seem to “fight the power.” The theorists, however, would reply that even—or especially—when a product of the culture industry seems to be rebellious or “anti-authoritarian,”
The worst part of the culture industry, Adorno and Horkheimer say, is that there is no way to escape it. We may feel superior to television shows like the ones they describe or the ones discussed in the “Resisting Television” box, and we may even create an “anti-advertising” or “anti-culture industry” identity as in the case study at the end of the chapter. But we can only turn to other products of the culture industry to show that superiority:

Marked differentiations such as those of A and B films, or of stories in magazines in different price ranges, depend not so much on subject matter as on classifying, organising, and labelling consumers. Something is provided for all so that none may escape; the distinctions are emphasized and extended. . . . Everybody must behave (as if spontaneously) in accordance with his previously determined and indexed level, and choose the category of mass product turned out for his type. Consumers appear as statistics on research organization charts, and are divided by income groups into red, green, and blue areas; the technique is that used for any type of propaganda. (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1994, p. 123)

People who say they don’t watch “Hollywood films” or own a television but instead buy only classical music and watch “art films” are not thus evading the “culture industry”; they are participating in its economics by identifying themselves merely as a certain type of consumer, no better or worse (in the eyes of the culture industry) than any other consumer. And the ideal type of consumer for the culture industry is a passive one: a spectator who consumes the same products again and again rather than actively participating in the culture.

In this way, the culture industry regulates both group and individual behaviour. Even those critics who analyze the culture industry aren’t immune: “The triumph of advertising
in the culture industry is that consumers feel compelled to buy and use its products even though they see through them” (p. 167). Consumer passivity and the flattening of culture are all-pervasive, making these the primary vehicle for hegemonic ideas.

Contemporary Hollywood trends can provide a good example of the flattening and homogenization of culture that Adorno and Horkheimer discuss: the endless “reboots” of film franchises (from Star Trek and Star Wars to superhero movies—themselves “reboots” of comic books), and their often predictable plotlines, can be seen to show a lack of originality, a focus on consumerism, and a reproduction of certain hegemonic visions of violence, war, masculinity, and so on. Nor is this flattening new: the plethora of Tarzan films from the 1930s to 1960s, the continual production of gangster films, and so on all point to the homogenizing structures of the culture industry and to the passive audience that, Adorno and Horkheimer would say, is the ultimate “product” of that industry.

Aura and Mechanical Reproduction: Walter Benjamin

Walter Benjamin (1892–1940), another member of the Frankfurt School, agrees with Adorno and Horkheimer that how contemporary cultural products are produced profoundly changes our experience of those products. Unlike Adorno and Horkheimer, though, Benjamin is interested in describing what he sees as the complexity of our relationship to these products, and in so doing he lays the groundwork for later popular culture studies.

In his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Benjamin attempts to come to grips with how the experience of viewing art has changed in the modern period, when new technologies—photography, film, and others—mean that specific works of art can be reproduced time and again. Although “[i]n principle a work of art has always been reproducible,” the “[m]echanical reproduction of a work of art . . . represents something new” (Benjamin, 1969, p. 218). For Benjamin, works of art before the age of mechanical reproduction were largely tied to a specific time and place. If you wanted to see the Mona Lisa or Haida poles, you would have to physically go to where they were, to share the same space with that work of art, what Benjamin calls “its unique existence at the place where it happens to be” (p. 220). The work of art in this situation is invested with a uniqueness: it is a specific object in a specific place, and nothing else can replicate its existence. The unique nature of a work of art is thus tied to its originality and authenticity. If the Mona Lisa is reproduced as a postcard you take home from the Louvre, you know it’s not the “real” Mona Lisa, and if someone tried to sell you the Mona Lisa, you would know that it was likely a forgery, a fake. The original piece of art is, for Benjamin, invested with a certain authority and authenticity that lends to the viewing experience a quality that is lacking from these copies.
Benjamin uses the term **aura** to define this experience, and he connects the aura of a work of art to the aura one experiences in nature:

> We define the aura of [natural objects] as the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be. If, while resting on a summer afternoon, you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow over you, you experience the aura of those mountains, of that branch. (pp. 222–23)

Benjamin’s aura is the feeling one gets when witnessing a beautiful object in its necessary and specific location, and recognizing that that object and the experience of seeing it is a singular one. For Benjamin, this aura lends a feeling of “[u]niqueness and permanence” to that beautiful object (p. 223): nothing else in the world is like it, and its beauty is intrinsically part of its identity and cannot be removed from it.

While a natural object derives this aura simply from its relation to the viewer within its natural surroundings—that is, from the uniqueness of that particular natural object within the larger context of the surrounding natural world—the artistic, human-made object must derive its uniqueness in another way. How can you tell that a work of art is unique to begin with, and not derivative of something else? Benjamin says that our knowledge of the uniqueness of a cultural object is inseparable from our knowledge of its place in a larger cultural tradition. It doesn’t matter *what* tradition the object is placed in, so long as it’s placed within a larger cultural context: “An ancient statue of Venus, for example, stood in a different traditional context with the Greeks, who made it an object of veneration, than with the clerics of the Middle Ages, who viewed it as an ominous idol. Both of them, however, were equally confronted with its uniqueness, that is, its aura” (p. 223). The uniqueness and aura of the object is tied to its role within a specific ritual, whether that ritual is religious, political, aesthetic, or more generally cultural. Placing the artistic object within such a tradition, and recognizing its importance, provides it with both a purpose and place within the larger social order of which we are a part.

The technological ability of a machine to exactly reproduce a work of art, however, effectively eradicates the uniqueness of such an object, and hence its aura. Anticipating and laying the foundation for Jean Baudrillard’s theory of the postmodern simulacrum (see Chapter 10), Benjamin writes,

> [F]or the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual. To an ever greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility. From a photographic negative, for example, one can make any number of prints; to ask for the “authentic” print makes no sense. (p. 224)

Adorno and Horkheimer make a similar point, writing that “Real life is becoming indistinguishable from the movies” (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1994, p. 126). Because of its complete lack of uniqueness, the modern, mass-produced and reproduced cultural object loses any sense of traditional aura. The “distance” that Benjamin discusses in
relation to natural aura is replaced with an ever-accessible closeness. No longer do we need to go to the Louvre to see the Mona Lisa: we can buy prints of it to hang in our living rooms. More importantly, for Benjamin, contemporary cultural forms like photography no longer have an original at all, nor do they have that specific location in time and place—in tradition—that aura derives from. If “uniqueness and permanence” are tied to that natural scene and the traditional form of art, then “transitoriness and reproducibility” are tied to the mechanical arts (p. 223). The act of “pry[ing] an object from its shell” in turn “destroy[s] its aura” (p. 223): when any art object can be reproduced and moved anywhere, Benjamin argues, the uniqueness of the experience of artistic beauty is slowly destroyed.

But what is left in the place of this experience? For Benjamin, the aura of the experience of the beautiful object embedded in a particular tradition and context—a “ritual”—is replaced by politics (p. 224). Like Adorno and Horkheimer, he sees contemporary culture as shrinking the distance between art and reality. However, where the former theorists see this fact as leading to an inability of culture to give us the space necessary to examine our lives fully, Benjamin sees the potential for a democratizing effect. Contemporary cultural forms—and especially, Benjamin says, film—can awaken us to the processes that govern our daily lives and put us in a position to critically assess them:

By close-ups of the things around us, by focusing on hidden details of familiar objects, by exploring commonplace milieus under the ingenious guidance of the camera, the film, on the one hand, extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives; on the other hand, it manages to assure us of an immense and unexpected field of action. Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second. . . . The camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses. (pp. 236–37)

While the destruction of aura may strike Adorno as leading to the death of artistic meaning, for Benjamin it “burst[s] . . . asunder” previous assumptions about the world, and so can lead to a new politicization of culture that can be used to combat movements like Fascism (Hitler had already come to power by the time Benjamin wrote this essay).

However, there is still some significant space in Benjamin’s essay to see this loss of aura as a political and cultural problem. He does write, after all, that film places “the public in the position of the critic,” and yet “at the movies this position requires no attention. The public is an examiner, but an absent-minded one” (pp. 240–41). This has led to some divided opinions of Benjamin’s relationship with modern culture. As one source puts it, “On the one hand, with regard to some of his writings, Benjamin’s concept of aura has been accused of fostering a nostalgic, purely negative sense of modernity as loss—loss of unity both with nature and in community. . . . On the other hand, in the work on film, Benjamin appears to adopt an affirmative technological modernism, which celebrates the consequences of the decline” (Osborne & Charles, 2011).
The Aura of *The Maltese Falcon* (1941)

*The Maltese Falcon* (1930), Dashiell Hammett’s famed hard-boiled detective novel, was made into an equally famous film that can be read as a meditation on aura and political revelation, the very concepts that characterize the divergent readings of Benjamin’s theories. In the film (as in the novel), a group of people are trying to hunt down the famed Maltese Falcon, a supposedly jewel-encrusted, immensely valuable sculpture. As in most film noir and hard-boiled narratives, much murder and mayhem surround these attempts, with private detective Sam Spade (Humphrey Bogart) being almost indistinguishable from the criminals he tries to—and eventually does—catch. In the end, the Falcon (at least the one that’s found) turns out to be nothing but a plain statue, of no intrinsic worth whatsoever.

What’s interesting for our purposes is the way the Falcon “itself” comments on questions of the market and aura. The criminals searching for the Falcon have lengthy tales about its place in world history and its singularity, treating it as an object of not just great material value but also of great historical worth. In other words, it has aura. But it turns out to be a “fake,” and at the end of the film we’re left questioning whether there’s any such thing as the real Falcon, even as the criminals vow to keep searching. In this way the film shows how aura itself can be “sold” as a marketable item.

And yet the film does critique this marketing, perhaps operating, as Benjamin argues, to expose the “unconscious impulses” of capitalist society: here, those impulses are figured as the pointless obsession of criminals.

*Photo 7.1*  The Maltese Falcon, as it appeared in the 1941 film.
*Source: AF Archive/Alamy*
THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE: MARSHALL McLuhan

The divided reaction to his work helps to place Benjamin as a bridge between Adorno and Horkheimer’s negative readings of the culture industry and the Birmingham School’s view of popular culture as a potential space of active political and social involvement. This bridging space is inhabited by another theorist, though, one who is much closer in time to the Birmingham School and who also helped create the field of popular culture studies: media theorist Marshall McLuhan (1911–1980). Born in Edmonton and educated at the University of Manitoba and Cambridge University, McLuhan is Canada’s best known cultural and media theorist. He’s famous for coining the phrase “the medium is the message,” which is both the title of a chapter in his work Understanding Media (McLuhan, 1964) and a pithy summary of that work’s main point. This phrase has become so popular as to become part of popular culture itself. (In fact, McLuhan had a way with coining such phrases: he’s credited with “the global village” as well.)

“The medium is the message” also summarizes McLuhan’s methodology. Much like the formalist literary critics who were writing at this time, McLuhan was primarily interested in analyzing the forms culture took. Specifically, he argued that the content of contemporary mass culture was less important than the way in which it was transmitted to its consumer or viewer. Like Benjamin, McLuhan saw the rise of mass communications technology as significantly altering our relationship with culture. However, Benjamin, as well as Adorno and Horkheimer, focused on the difference these technologies created between traditional forms of art or culture and the new mass culture; McLuhan, conversely, was interested in the specific nature of these new media forms, their difference from each other, and what effect they had on the culture consumer.

For McLuhan, the effect of the medium doesn’t change depending on what’s shown through that medium: a television comedy and a television documentary share the same medium, and for McLuhan that commonality is more important that any difference in content.

He uses the examples of the lightbulb and the train to explain this position:

The electric light is pure information. It is a medium without a message, as it were, unless it is used to spell out some verbal ad or name. This fact, characteristic of all media, means that the “content” of any medium is always another medium. The content of writing is speech, just as the written word is the content of print, and print is the content of the telegraph. If it is asked, “What is the content of speech?,” it is necessary to say, “It is an actual process of thought, which is in itself nonverbal.” An abstract painting represents direct manifestation of creative thought processes as they might appear in computer designs. What we are considering here, however, are the psychic and social consequences of the designs or patterns as they amplify or accelerate existing processes. For the “message” of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs. The railway did not introduce movement or transportation or wheel or road into human society, but it accelerated and enlarged the scale of previous human functions, creating totally new kinds of cities and new kinds of work and leisure. (pp. 23–24)
The train may share the basic purpose and goal—the same content—as a horse-drawn buggy, but the form that that content takes—it can move faster, stop less regularly, and traverse greater distances in less time—transformed the economies of the world. Likewise, the airplane, and its increasing popularity, helped to usher in the age of globalization. A lightbulb may share the same purpose as a candle, but since it gives off more light and can be harnessed in greater numbers more safely, it can transform the types of life a society can have after dark.

Similarly, McLuhan argues, while the content of culture remains relatively static across media, the form that media takes transforms culture. Benjamin makes a similar point, of course, when he argues that mass reproduction—and hence the technological media that allow that reproduction—alter our relationship with a piece of art.

**Hot Media and Cold Media**

McLuhan’s analysis is much more specific, however, when he draws distinctions between types of mass media. He contends that contemporary media can be divided into two groups: hot media and cold. **Hot media**, he argues, are “high definition” media that fully engage one or more of our senses, making us passive receivers of its images, sounds, and so on (p. 36). **Cold media**, conversely, are “low definition,” forcing us to fill in gaps in the transmission, making us more active readers/viewers/listeners or consumers more generally (p. 36). So, a photograph, which reproduces an event with clarity and precision, is “hot” because it doesn’t require us to pay close attention to figure out what’s going on. A cartoon or comic, because it is much less precise and clear in its visual depiction of a scene, requires us to work more actively to understand it.

Importantly, for McLuhan, television is an example of a cold medium—writing in 1963, the televisions McLuhan knew were generally much smaller, had poorer reception, were black and white, had small speakers, and so on. So, televisions required work on behalf of the viewer to understand what was happening.

It’s tempting to see the distinction between hot and cold media, between the passive and active viewer, as also a distinction between being a “subject” of media and an “agent” in relation to it. McLuhan didn’t see it this way, however: he saw the difference between hot and cold as one that transforms the very ways people engage in the world. Because cold media, like older television, require so much involvement of their audience, they transform the ways in which that audience engages with the world: “The young people who have experienced a decade of TV have naturally imbibed an urge toward involvement in depth that makes all the remote visualized goals of usual culture seem not only unreal but irrelevant” (p. 292).

This involvement in the unreality of television (something that theorist Jean Baudrillard explores further, as discussed in Chapter 10) creates a paradoxical desire to be deeply involved in life, and an inability to “see ahead,” because the television viewer wants immediate satisfaction. “TV makes for myopia,” McLuhan writes, but also creates a longing for “involvement.” Instead of a “job” the “TV child” wants a “role” (p. 292).
Clearly, this new way of being in the world is problematic for McLuhan, but he still sees that longing for involvement and depth as a potential source of “pedagogical richness,” provided it’s not left “[u]nbridled” (p. 292). As with Benjamin, then, we are left in a tense space, where these new media do create new forms of engagement and activity in the world but can also lead to new forms of passivity and emptiness. In the next section we discuss theorists who likewise see this tense positioning, but fall firmly on the side of agency, rather than subjection, in relation to people’s engagement with popular culture.

**THE BIRMINGHAM SCHOOL**

Whereas the Frankfurt School looked upon the social and cultural roles of popular culture with suspicion, and in some cases outright hostility, the later Birmingham School is often seen as championing their radical possibilities. Of course, as we saw in the discussion of Walter Benjamin, the Frankfurt School wasn’t so monolithic in its approach, and the same can be said for the Birmingham theorists. Still, these theorists offer a much more positive vision of popular culture, specifically in terms of people’s engagement with it.
Like the term Frankfurt School, Birmingham School refers both to a group of loosely associated theorists and critics and to a general critical paradigm based on their work. The “school” is the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, founded at the University of Birmingham in 1964. It is largely credited with popularizing the term cultural studies and with framing the study of popular culture as a legitimate academic discipline. In fact, when people use the term cultural studies, they’re often referring directly to the Birmingham School's vision of the discipline, which is sometimes referred to as British Cultural Studies.

The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies was founded in part to encourage the widening of the scope of university study—to move away from traditional social science and humanities methodologies as well as to challenge the traditional object choices of those studies. The analysts at the Centre thus studied British working-class culture, various subcultures, and popular cultural objects, including popular music, television, and other material. In many ways, then, this tradition of cultural studies is responsible for this book and for the classes you're studying it in.

Importantly, the Centre also explicitly challenged the disciplinary divisions that constitute traditional university studies. So, while people in English and in sociology departments, for example, didn't traditionally teach together or engage in collaborative research, the Centre encouraged communication and research sharing between these disciplinary “silos,” as they came to be called. Tied to this interdisciplinary practice, and in part because of it, the conventional objects and methodologies of study within these disciplines were also challenged. To use our two examples again, while English professors had traditionally studied the canon of literature using what were, by 1964, standard formal analyses of patterns of metaphor, imagery, and so on, Birmingham-inflected cultural studies had them turning to such spheres as history, sociological studies of reception, and studies of race and gender, making the study of English more material and social-scientific in some ways; likewise, rather than sociologists engaging in empirical studies of the material practices of a given group, they began to focus on the cultural aspects of that society in order to examine its more aesthetic elements, often incorporating techniques used in humanities disciplines, such as close textual analysis. This transformation is often referred to as the cultural turn, echoing the linguistic turn we discussed in Chapter 5.

Taken together, then, these practices begin to break down the traditional barriers between academic disciplines and to open up both the material and the methods of the study of culture. Part of this project also broke down the biases surrounding what constituted “good” or “high” culture, and also questioned traditional assumptions about the value of popular culture.

In the remainder of this chapter we discuss some of the specific theoretical and critical methods developed by some of the major thinkers of the Birmingham School. Like many of the theorists we’ve already examined, including those from the Frankfurt School, Birmingham School theorists were greatly influenced by Marxist thought, although they developed it very differently from the Frankfurt School.
Working Cultures

One of the primary theoretical advancements of the Birmingham School is the idea that people don’t simply consume culture passively but are instead active agents with respect to cultural products and the use thereof. While Adorno and Horkheimer see the consumers of the “culture industry” as passive vessels that get filled up by the dominant ideological messages embedded in popular culture, the Birmingham School thinkers see the relationship between dominant ideologies, cultural products, and their reception as much more complex. In this section we’ll trace two of the significant deployments of this premise, in the works of E. P. Thompson (1924–1993) and Stuart Hall (1932– ).

E. P. Thompson’s book, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Thompson, 1963), is often cited as being foundational to the new cultural studies. The first lines of its preface make clear both what Thompson sees as the problems of early sociological histories and how his new study will differ from them: “This book has a clumsy title,” he writes, “but it is one which meets its purpose. Making, because it is a study in an active process, which owes as much to agency as to conditioning. The working class did not rise like the sun at an appointed time. It was present at its own making” (p. 9). Building on Marx’s prescription that one must look to how people actually live their lives in order to understand their society, Thompson goes further, noting that within their “lived experience” people actually respond to and interpret their social surroundings and what happens around them. To use the terminology we’ve been employing, and which Thompson uses similarly here, he sees people as agents rather than just subjects in their own lives.

Just as importantly, his study of class changes traditional approaches as well. Rather than assuming both the makeup and importance of class as a social structure, one that seemingly pre-exists and shapes people’s interactions with each other, he sees class as a process that happens when people interact. For Thompson, class isn’t a “structure” or “category” but instead a dynamic, relational action that occurs between people and that allows them to “feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs” (p. 9). Thus, although people’s “class experience is largely determined by the productive relations into which men are born,” the ways they react to those conditions as a group, their “[c]lass-consciousness,” is not so directly determined, as a more simplistic or linear Marxism would have it (pp. 9–10). Thompson argues that there is “a logic in the responses of similar occupational groups undergoing similar experiences” that can be discussed and analyzed (p. 10), but that this is different from saying those responses—and so those people—are fully determined by those experiences. Therefore, he writes, class must be understood “as a social and cultural formation” (p. 11; emphasis added).

Thompson is quite clear that he’s attempting to transform historical and sociological study in such a way as to recognize in “working people” a conscious, agential relationship to their world. He states outright that he realizes he is

writing against the weight of prevailing orthodoxies. There is the Fabian orthodoxy, in which the great majority of working people are seen as passive victims of *laissez faire*,

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with the exception of a handful of far-sighted organisers. . . . There is the orthodoxy of the empirical economic historians, in which working people are seen as a labour force, as migrants, or as the data for statistical series. (p. 12)

Thompson challenges these two orthodoxies, along with a third that sees earlier periods as important only insofar as they predict our period. The first two narratives, he says, “tend to obscure the agency of working people, the degree to which they contributed, by conscious efforts, to the making of history,” while the third twists history into part of our moment, ignoring how “in fact it occurred” (p. 12). Thompson thus sees class identity as an identity that is in flux and changes as people interact. This basic premise forms the foundation of later popular cultural studies of identity, as we will discuss in Part IV.

Thompson’s eight-hundred-page opus presents, in minute detail, many of the cultural and social aspects of the development of the working class in England, offering, ultimately, a very focused history, the specifics of which aren’t necessarily useful for us. But the idea that history was necessarily specific to a particular people or region is itself an important development: rather than pointing to a universal history, Thompson’s argument about the agency of specific people necessitates a close and focused analysis. This laser-sharp focus on particularities became a feature of Birmingham School criticism as well as of some of its later offshoots (such as New Historicism, discussed in Chapter 8).

**Cultural Agents**

But while this specificity of focus means it can be difficult to present an overarching methodology for the various studies that constitute the Birmingham School, some of its members did attempt to provide wider theoretical models for the study of particular cultural objects. Among these, Stuart Hall’s study of television and its audiences stands out.

Like Thompson, Hall was invested in reading the consuming audience as active rather than passive in the creation of meaning. His best known meditation on this relationship is in his essay “Encoding/Decoding” (Hall, 1980). Focusing on communication technologies and specifically on television, Hall, like Thompson, begins his piece by explaining how this new approach differs from more conventional studies:

> Traditionally, mass-communications research has conceptualized the process of communication in terms of a circulation circuit or loop. This model has been criticized for its linearity—sender/message/receiver—for its concentration on the level of message exchange and for the absence of a structured conception of the different moments as a complex structure of relations. (p. 128)

In this earlier model, there is no room for misunderstanding or misinterpretation. But for Hall, this misses the primary method of communication that television (and other forms of mass communication) employ: what he calls **discourse**, a term that will become increasingly significant in cultural studies. Discourse refers to the entire range of signifying practices in a society, composed not only of language but also of the codes that structure our daily practice, production, use, and interpretation of media. As such, discourse is too multifaceted for its meanings to be completely determined by the culture producer, as in
the more simplistic model above. To put it simply, clearly different readings, some often counter to the producer’s intent, do occur. Hall is interested, in part, in what this fact means to a larger theory of reception and communication.

Given that messages don’t always move smoothly and linearly from producer to receiver, Hall spells out another model to explain the production of meaning within this relationship. Any element of mass communication must be made within discourse, or more generally within “language,” he argues, and as such it is within the slippery realm of language (as we defined it in Chapter 5) that meaning is created. This makes it difficult, if not impossible, to control the meaning from the “production” end of culture:

It is in the discursive form that the circulation of the product takes place, as well as its distribution to different audiences. Once accomplished, the discourse must then be translated—transformed, again—into social practices if the circuit is to be both completed and effective. If no “meaning” is taken, there can be no “consumption.” (p. 128)

In other words, meaning is never controlled by just one party in the dialogue; the meaning of a text or television show isn’t fully contained within that object, just waiting to be discovered by the viewer. Instead, when a statement is created, the producer may “encode” meanings in it, but the receiver must still “decode” the message, and those two processes may not arrive at the same meaning.

But why don’t they? Is it because we are all individuals and so have essential, in-born differences that lead us to different conclusions? Hall would say no, that instead both the production and the reception of a work are acts that are engaged in a variety of discursive practices, each of which helps to shape the meanings that both sides see in the work. Hall uses the diagram in Figure 7.1 to explain how meanings are determined on both sides of the production/reception circuit.

![Figure 7.1 Encoding/Decoding](source: Hall, Stuart, et al., eds. *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972–79*, p. 130.)
Important to note is that Hall, building on Marx but also on other theorists we’ve studied in Part III, does not see meaning and interpretation as completely free or constructed by an individual’s free response. He views us as subjects and agents, not as individuals. Thus, on the left-hand side of the diagram, the producer of a text must create meaning within a set of structures that work to predetermine that meaning to one degree or another, whether owing to the technical limitations of a television studio’s equipment or the larger social class structure within which the studio exists (including which “demographic” it’s trying to reach). Likewise, viewers are determined by their own positions within these structures: Does the viewer have a large-screen HD television or a small black-and-white? What is the viewer’s relative class and social position?

**Encoding/Decoding**  Within these structures, Hall focuses on the significance of the top category, the “frameworks of knowledge.” These are the “the discursive rules of language” (p. 130), those semiotic structures discussed in Chapter 5 without which words would be meaningless. But because the producer and receiver of the television show or other communication are in differently determined positions within society—different subject positions—their relationships to these frameworks will also be different. Because of this difference, Hall writes,

> Clearly, what we have labelled in the diagram “meaning structures 1” and “meaning structures 2” may not be the same. . . . The codes of encoding and decoding may not be perfectly symmetrical. The degrees of symmetry—that is, the degrees of “understanding” and “misunderstanding” in the communicative exchange—depend on . . . the structural differences of relation and position between broadcasters and audiences. (p. 131)

Different groups are determined in different ways, and so read and interpret examples of discourse differently. Therefore, in order to offer a scholarly analysis of television, Hall says we have to pay attention not only to its content and the technical conditions of its production and reception (its form, generally speaking), but also to the ways both interact within larger codes of discourse, which also vary depending on which particular audience is viewing the program.

Still within this complex interpretational matrix, Hall says we can see three general positions from which people interpret a television show. These are the “dominant-hegemonic position,” the “negotiated code or position,” and the “oppositional code” or position (see pp. 136–38). In the production of television (or film, or any cultural work that requires a great deal of money and resources), the “encoded” message (on the left side of Figure 7.1) is in all likelihood going to ideologically support the status quo. Viewers in the first position, above, will agree with this message: as Hall writes, “When the viewer takes the connoted meaning from, say, a television newscast or current affairs programme full and straight, and decodes the message in terms of the reference code in which it has been encoded, we might say that the viewer is operating inside the dominant code” (p. 136). However, some people are aware of these codes, but because they are operating in a
In a clear example of Hall’s theory of the differing decoding practices of different groups, some relatively well-to-do white Westerners made a video, *Kony 2012*, in an attempt to highlight the abuse of child soldiers by Joseph Kony during conflict in the area around the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The video went viral on social media when many more well-to-do Westerners (and others) viewed and shared the video in order to raise awareness of the situation and of Kony himself. However, when the film was shown in Uganda to Ugandans, some of whom had been Kony’s victims, they had a completely different reaction: they pointed to errors and misrepresentations in the film and worried that it might negatively impact people’s vision of Uganda, which Kony had left years before. The clearly opposed, radically different “frameworks of knowledge” in these two audiences led to diametrically opposed interpretations of the film.


These two positions, the first and third in Hall’s list, coincide with my reading of the two opposed reactions to the *Kony 2012* video. One group bought into the creators’ emotional plea for awareness, but the other saw in that same message a statement that conveyed ignorance and misinformation about Africa, ignorance and misinformation that generally characterize dominant Western narratives of Africa. So, even though the creators and “dominant code” viewers saw themselves as doing something noble to help Ugandans (and Africans more generally), the “oppositional” viewers saw the creators as actually doing the exact opposite.

The third group, which contains those following a “negotiated code,” falls between the other two positions. In this position, Hall argues, viewers generally accept the dominant position, but are likely to reinterpret it somewhat, or apply that position differently to their own personal or specific-group interests:

Negotiated codes operate through what we might call particular or situated logics: and these logics are sustained by their differential and unequal relation to the discourses and logics of power. The simplest example of a negotiated code is that which governs
the response of a worker to the notion of an Industrial Relations Bill limiting the right
to strike or to arguments for a wages freeze. At the level of the “national interest” eco-
nomic debate the decoder may adopt the hegemonic definition, agreeing that “we must
all pay ourselves less in order to combat inflation.” This, however, may have little or no
relation to his/her willingness to go on strike for better pay and conditions or to oppose
the Industrial Relations Bill at the level of shop-floor or union organization. (p. 137)

In short, then, the “negotiated code” is one that can support the status quo at the macro
but not the personal level. This can lead to people working against their own stated beliefs
in their daily lives (for example, those who believe in the dictates of the Catholic Church
but nonetheless use birth control). It may also lead people to work against their own inter-
ests (for example, those who vote to cut federal spending on social programs like food
stamps or unemployment insurance, even as they or their family, friends, and co-workers
relies on those programs).

For Hall, the meaning of any given text can never be found through critics simply
examining that text at their desk. Instead, the several meanings that can be ascribed to the
text are the product of a matrix of social, cultural, linguistic, and other frames of reference
that are constantly shifting depending on the multiple positions of producers, viewers, and
texts. Any critical analysis of a given text or situation, then, has to carefully situate its
own position in this matrix even as it carefully delineates the position of all those other
actors. This critical practice makes Birmingham School interpretations very specific and
detailed, as we’ll see in the next section.

Subcultures

Thus far we have focused on popular culture as a phenomenon encountered by the popu-
lation en masse, so to speak. We’ve discussed the relationship between popular culture and
ideology, hegemony, myth, and other ways of framing dominant belief systems, whether as
methods used by the dominant class to maintain the status quo or as a reflection of a soci-
ety’s larger beliefs and/or practices. As Hall’s formulation of oppositional and negotiated
codes of interpretation makes clear, though, not everyone responds to cultural objects or
practices in the same way. But these multiple positions are not solely—or always visibly—
due to such macro-social group distinctions as class, gender, race, or sexuality. There are
also divisions of region, age, body type, and so on, as well as explicitly cultural distinctions
even within a generally coherent group. For example, although any particular group of
teenagers in a high school may share most or even all the characteristics listed above, they
may still break into different cliques or groups that see themselves as radically opposed: in
addition to the generally dominant groups in school, there are emo kids and goths, punks
and posers, and so on. These can all be referred to as subcultures, and many cultural theo-
rists have used the practices of these subcultural groups to understand larger social and
cultural dynamics.

The major statement on subcultures was made by Birmingham School theorist Dick
makes it clear that overly general discussions of “dominant ideology” fail to meet the purposes of cultural studies because they don’t offer detailed enough analyses to be valuable. He argues that “in highly complex societies like ours, which function through a finely graded system of divided (i.e. specialized) labour, the crucial question has to do with which specific ideologies, representing the interests of which specific groups and classes will prevail at any given moment, in any given situation” (p. 14). In other words, as with Hall’s theories, Hebdige argues that we must analyze very specific situations and moments, since large or sweeping statements will fail to capture the social nuance of any particular cultural moment and thus misunderstand “how power is distributed in our society” (p. 14).

To explain this approach further, Hebdige turns to Antonio Gramsci’s theory of hegemony, which we discussed in Chapter 3. Because hegemony is a functional union of ideologies across the whole range of a given society, and because this union must therefore function through consent and not just coercion, it is, Hebdige notes, unstable at best. If the dominant classes are to maintain power, then popular commodities, from television shows to safety pins, must help to gain consent from a variety of non-dominant groups. But because these groups’ interests can differ, there is no way for the dominant classes to fully control the “messages” these commodities contain. This is the basic conclusion that Hall comes to as well in his theories of “encoding” and “decoding.”

Hebdige takes this instability of meaning a little further: “forms cannot be permanently normalized,” he writes. “They can always be deconstructed, demystified” by cultural critics, but “commodities” can also be “symbolically ‘repossessed’ in everyday life, and endowed with implicitly oppositional meanings, by the very groups who originally produced them” and by the groups who use them (p. 16). In this way, he writes, the dominant ideologies of a society “can be prised open. The consensus can be fractured, challenged, over-rulled, and resistance to the groups in dominance cannot always be lightly dismissed or automatically incorporated” (pp. 16–17). Again as for Hall, but unlike the conclusions drawn by Adorno and Horkheimer, Hebdige sees in everyday culture (the way in which people produce and use cultural items in their daily lives, including items of popular culture) a space not only for ideological control, but also for resistance to the dominant way of seeing things. In other words, although popular culture is produced and disseminated within the hegemonic functions of the market, it’s possible to rewrite or respond to those hegemonic codes in the ways people use that popular culture as part of their everyday lives.

It is this space of resistance—albeit one that can be co-opted by the dominant culture—that Hebdige sees in youth countercultures. Writing in the late 1970s in England, the most obviously resistant of these subcultures for Hebdige were the punks. Situating punk within a white, working-class cultural matrix, and tying it to the simultaneous rise of the popularity of reggae in black British youth culture, Hebdige paints a picture of self-contradictory youth subcultures that nonetheless allow for a critical entry point into working-class resistances to the upper-class, white hegemony of England and the larger
British Isles. He argues that punk, by appropriating the styles of reggae and Jamaican culture even as it attempts to situate a “white” ethnic identity, articulates a resistance to the dominant culture that challenges what Hall would call the “dominant-hegemonic” code of cultural interpretation.

From a detailed discussion of the particular histories, traditions, music, and dress of these subcultures, Hebdige concludes that “[s]ubcultures represent ‘noise’ (as opposed to sound): interference in the orderly sequence which leads from real events and phenomena to their representation in the media” (p. 90). Instead of a linear narrative, which would tend to support dominant interests, subcultures exploit “spectacle” in order to use the media against the dominant culture that controls it. To do this, punks, and subcultures in general, use certain styles that directly challenge hegemonic norms. “Style in subculture,” he writes, citing Roland Barthes’s notion of “myth,” is “pregnant with significance. Its transformations go ‘against nature,’ interrupting the process of ‘normalization.’ As such, they are gestures, movements towards a speech which offends the ‘silent majority,’ which challenges the principle of unity and cohesion, which contradicts the myth of consensus” (p. 18). Whereas the dominant group uses the “myth” of cohesion to frame national, racial, gendered, sexual, economic, or other ideologies, saying, in effect, that “we are all in this together, so don’t rock the boat,” subcultures rock the boat in ways that people can’t ignore, in effect showing people that things weren’t that stable to begin with.

**Bricolage** One of the ways in which subcultures both embody and represent this instability is through the use of *bricolage*. Taken from Claude Lévi-Strauss’s work (see Chapter 5), the term *bricolage* is used to refer to the use of material objects in people’s immediate surroundings “to ‘think’ their own world” (Hebdige, 1988, p. 103). In other words, the objects one uses in daily life are seen to be complexly interconnected in ways that help explain the world. For Lévi-Strauss, in so-called “primitive” and magical world views, the *bricoleur* uses the limited objects that surround him in his life in order to explain those aspects of his environment that he cannot “properly” understand: thus, famine or natural disaster could be attributed to gods who appear in the form of animals that the *bricoleur* sees every day.

Hebdige and other subcultural theorists appropriate this (somewhat condescending) notion of *bricolage* to explain how subcultures express themselves. Important to remember, Hebdige says, is the fact that “subcultures are not privileged forms; they do not stand outside . . . of the social totality”; in other words, while they may be resistant to one degree or another, subcultures are still part of the larger society (pp. 85–86). In the case of punk and reggae, Hebdige notes, these subcultures still express themselves through the dominant social mode of “conspicuous consumption”: i.e., through purchasing and using commodities (pp. 102–03), but they turn that consumption against the dominant forms expressly encouraged by hegemonic forces: “It is basically the way in which commodities are *used* in subculture which mark[s] the subculture off from more orthodox...
Bricolage in the contemporary sense thus involves the redeployment of everyday objects in new ways in order to challenge (consciously or not) hegemonic assumptions.

In the case of punk, certain objects associated with the working classes, and with normative domesticity, are deployed in ways that explicitly challenge the hegemonic post-war narratives of British cohesion and success. Safety pins—most commonly used in diapers at the time and so representative of British family values, the future of the next generation, and so on—are redeployed in seemingly “unsafe” ways, as clothing accessories and body piercings. By combining these with garbage bags as clothing, and with collage- and graffiti-style artistic expressions, punks’ very style served to undermine the dominant narrative in which each of these items has a particular place. “The punk subculture, then, signified chaos at every level” (p. 113). Instead of just resisting the dominant culture, punks reordered the signifying practices of that culture even as they refused to participate in it.

Of course, 1970s punk gave way to other subcultural forms in music and fashion, which in turn gave way to others. What happens to the resistance embodied by these forms? Well, you can likely answer this for yourself: if you type “punk fashion” into an internet search engine, many of the top hits you’ll see are for clothing stores or high-end fashion shows. Punk, in other words, has in many ways gone mainstream, as have other subcultures. How does this happen? Bricolage again offers an answer here: these subcultures use items of the dominant culture to make their statements. This makes them susceptible to being reappropriated by the dominant culture. As Hebdige argues, “Cut ups and collages, no matter how bizarre, do not change so much as rearrange things, and needless to say, the ‘explosive junction’ never occurs: no amount of stylistic incantation can alter the oppressive mode in which the commodities used in subculture have been produced” (p. 130). In the cult film Withnail & I, which is set at the end of the 1960s, Danny, subcultural guru and philosopher (and drug dealer), bemoans this fact, saying, “They’re selling hippie wigs in Woolworth’s, man.” Subcultural resistance is necessarily fleeting. But still, Hebdige writes, these forms of stylistic resistance do “have [their] moment” (p. 130) and can offer entry points to struggles to resist hegemonic control.
Can one turn to clearly resistant examples of popular culture—examples that critique popular culture itself—to find the space of resistance that Adorno and Horkheimer seem to say is impossible but that the Birmingham School suggests is possible? To answer this, let’s turn to two Canadian examples: the Adbusters movement and political theorist Naomi Klein’s analysis thereof in her well-known work *No Logo* (1999).

Adbusters, a collective founded in Vancouver, is best known for their “culture jamming” magazine of the same name. In this magazine, the group publishes revised versions of popular corporate advertisements that are designed to expose the ideologies lying behind the originals. One campaign, targeting tobacco ads, features a version of the Camel cigarette mascot, Joe Camel, revised as “Joe Chemo,” showing the familiar character dying in a hospital. The ads not only highlight the health effects of cigarette smoking but also expose the fact that tobacco companies profit from making people ill. Adbusters was also instrumental in the early days of the Occupy Wall Street movement.

In her book, Naomi Klein discusses the usefulness of such anti-consumerist activity as a way of disrupting the ideological apathy generated by popular (capitalist) culture and awakening people’s political will and thought. Klein and others see Adbusters as using the tools of the culture industry against itself in a way that rejects the more pessimistic of Adorno and Horkheimer’s statements. Part of the way they do this is through *bricolage*, pasting different images together in unusual contexts, creating something new and challenging of the dominant order.

But even as Adbusters resists dominant ideologies, it can get folded back into them (just as the TV shows discussed in the “Resisting Television” box, and as Hebdige discusses with subcultures). Indeed, some of Adbusters’ campaigns and strategies have been critiqued. After all, although they’re a not-for-profit group they still sell their magazine, and have developed a certain “brand identity” among, especially, counter-cultural youth in ways that mimic the demographic targeting of the very ads they critique. This is especially true of their “Blackspot Shoes” campaign, in which they teamed with Canadian shoemaker John Fluevog to create “brandless” shoes—in a very branded way. To their detractors, this move into product marketing seemed to transform Adbusters into the very thing they critiqued. Adbusters’s website (www.adbusters.org) even includes a “culture shop” from which you can purchase items. In this way, rather than “jamming” the dominant culture, Adbusters could be read as in fact reinforcing the very aspects of advertising culture they critique: they are constructing a type of consumer, and positioning themselves as a brand. Klein refers to this critique as a form of “purism” that’s much like the critiques “lobbed at every punk band that signs a record deal” (Klein, 2000, p. 296), but still, this kind of “selling out” does cause a philosophical problem for such movements. What starts off as an attempt to create a “cold” media intervention, in McLuhan’s terms, becomes too “hot”; what exactly the “encoded” and “decoded” messages are becomes unclear or confused.

Moreover, mass media and the culture industry have in a way desensitized us to culture jamming. Klein writes that “In these information-numb times, we are beyond being abruptly awakened by a startling image, a sharp juxtaposition or even a fabulously clever détournement” (p. 296) (*détournement*, as defined by a French group of artists known as the Situationists, means to transform dominant media tools or images against themselves). Contemporary advertising can be seen to employ the very methods of culture jamming, even if to the opposite effect. For example, consider an ad released by the company E*Trade for its stock-trading website. In this commercial, a man is
watching another commercial for a (fictional) drug called Nozulla; following the pattern of such commercials, a voiceover lists the possible side effects, which include “children born with the head of a golden retriever,” “the condition known as hot-dog finger,” and “seeing the dead.” This commercial effectively “jammed” commercials marketing drugs to non-specialists, but did so only in order to sell another product—the E*Trade website (many copies of this commercial are available on the internet).

Photo 7.3  The “Joe Chemo” campaign.
Source: Elaine Thompson/AP Images

Discussion Questions

1. Adorno and Horkheimer argue that the culture industry is designed solely to generate consent to the status quo and create consumers. How do you think they would respond to Stuart Hall’s assertion that one can create an “oppositional” reading of an item of popular culture?

2. McLuhan saw TV as a medium that makes its viewers long for depth in their lives and yet also makes them incapable of looking forward because they want immediate “involvement.” Does this sound like present-day critiques of video games and gamers’ engagement with them? If so, does that similarity tell us anything about gaming? Or does it open up a critique of McLuhan?

3. We discussed above whether social media is a “hot” or “cold” form, following McLuhan’s definitions. But McLuhan also says that the “medium is the message”: how does social
media shape what people say or think through them? Do online videos shape their messages in ways that differ from those of television and film?

4. In the “Resisting Television” box we discuss how Rick Mercer’s rants, and television political satire in general, can reinforce hegemonic political beliefs and structures. Can you find examples that challenge this reading? Can your examples both challenge and reinforce dominant beliefs?

5. One of the primary conclusions of Hebdige’s study of subcultures is that although subcultures originally set themselves against the dominant culture, they are often reappropriated by it. Can you think of recent examples of this process? How do you know when a subculture has been reappropriated?

Further Reading

