

**'What's goin' on?'***Popular culture, popular music, and media literacy*

To study popular music is to study popular culture. While this would appear to be a self-evident claim, much writing on popular music tends to treat it in isolation from the literature in the general field within which it is situated. The initial concern here is with the general nature and role of popular culture as a social phenomenon, primarily in contemporary society, but also in terms of its historical development. Within this broader ambit, my interest is with questions about the nature and production of popular culture, its social reception, and consumption; the value of studying popular culture, and the ways in which such studies can best be pursued. These questions embrace the dynamics of popular culture, cultural hierarchies and the politics of taste. In examining these questions, I have drawn on a range of theoretical and case-study material from media studies, cultural studies, history, sociology, and women's studies. This overview indicates what seem to me to be the starting points and preoccupations that should inform the study of popular culture.

I move from this general discussion to focus on the study of popular music. Academic analysis of popular music and its associated manifestations was initially slow to develop. During the 1970s and 1980s, even the increasingly popular field of media studies tended to concentrate its attention on the visual media, particularly television, and neglected popular music. There were notable exceptions, with the work of scholars such as Simon Frith, George Lipsitz, Iain Chambers, Angela McRobbie, Richard Middleton, John Shepherd, Dave Laing, Lawrence Grossberg, and Nelson George. During the 1990s, there was a veritable flood of material, as well as a marked increase in the number of courses either directly on popular music, or on it as an aspect of popular culture and media studies. While 'established' popular music scholars continued to produce important new work (e.g. Frith 1996; Grossberg 1992;

Lipsitz 1994), they were joined by writers such as Andy Bennett, Marcus Breen, Mavis Bayton, Sara Cohen, Reebee Garofalo, Phil Hayward, Steve Jones, Tony Mitchell, Keith Negus, Will Straw, and Deena Weinstein.

The new prominence of popular music studies reflects recognition of rock/pop music's centrality as a global cultural phenomenon, associated with a multi-billion dollar industry, and a many faceted pop-youth culture reaching out into every aspect of style. This emerging literary explosion takes a number of forms and approaches the topic from a range of perspectives, including political economy, cultural studies, feminist studies, and media studies, this last with its own rich theoretical mix of film theory, semiotics, psychoanalysis, feminism, and social theory (see the useful Bibliographies in Gratten 1995; Haggerty 1995; and, especially, Shepherd et al. 1997; also Shuker 1998).

The discussion here is necessarily selective and highly condensed, concentrating on those questions, theoretical positions and approaches which loom in the background throughout the text. I have attempted to make theoretical material accessible to those not familiar with the more extensive original discussions, while the interested reader can follow these up via the references provided.

As Horner and Swiss (1999: 7) observe, the different meanings given terms common to the vocabulary of popular music studies, including the very terms 'popular' and 'music', help shape the music and our experience of it. Accordingly, we begin by clarifying some key terms, especially 'culture', 'popular', and 'popular music', then move on to a brief examination of several central issues in any attempt to analyse the popular: the relationship between lived culture and cultural preferences; the question of ideology and preferred readings; the pleasures of the text; and recurring anxiety and debate over the effects of popular culture. A number of 'ways in' to the examination of popular culture are then outlined: the high culture tradition, identified with Leavisite English criticism; the mass society thesis associated with Frankfurt School Marxism; three variants of critical media theory – political economy, structuralism, and culturalism; and, finally, attempts to articulate post-modern analyses of the popular. In each case, examples of the application of the theoretical perspective to popular music are presented.

## SETTING AGENDAS

The meaning and utility of terms such as 'popular' and 'mass', especially in relation to 'culture' and 'media', have been the subject of considerable discussion and debate (see, for example, Williams 1981; Edgar and Sedgwick 1999). Similarly, 'popular music' and associated terms such as 'rock', 'rock 'n' roll', and 'pop', are used by musicians, fans, and academic analysts in a confusing variety of ways. Then there is 'media literacy', a term which refers to attempts to reconceptualise print-oriented literacy towards the critical 'reading' of all forms of media, including popular music. In all

these cases, it needs to be remembered that it is difficult to define phenomena which are social practices as well as economic products or pedagogic concepts, and which are not static but constantly evolving. Indeed, precise definitions can be constraining; they should be regarded as frameworks for exploration and elaboration, rather than factual declarations to be defended. That said, let us try at least to pin down the general nature of some of the concepts which are central to cultural studies.

### Popular culture and the mass media

'Popular' is a contested term. For some it simply means appealing to the people, whereas for others it means something much more grounded in or 'of' the people. The former usage generally refers to commercially produced forms of popular culture, while the latter is reserved for forms of 'folk' popular culture, associated with local community-based production and individual craftspeople. In relation to popular music, for example, this is the distinction often made between folk music, especially when acoustically based, and the chart-oriented products of the record companies. As we shall see, however, such a clear-cut distinction has become increasingly untenable.

While not all popular culture is associated with the mass media, there is a reciprocal relationship between the two. The mass media involve large-scale production, by large economic units, for a mass, albeit segmented, market. The term 'mass media' refers to print, aural, and visual communication on a large scale – the press, publishing, radio and television, film and video, the recording industry, and telecommunications, to mention only the more obvious mediums of production and dissemination. Used as an adjective, 'popular' indicates that something – a person, a product, a practice, or a belief – is commonly liked or approved of by a large audience or the general public. Applied to the media, this means that particular television programmes, films, records, and books and magazines are widely consumed. Their popularity is indicated by ratings surveys, box-office returns, and sales figures. To a degree, this definition of 'popularity' reifies popular cultural texts, reducing them to the status of objects to be bought and sold in the marketplace, and the social nature of their consumption must always be kept in mind. This study equates the 'popular' with commercial, cultural forms of entertainment, and regards markets as an inescapable feature of popular culture.

Popularity is central to popular culture, as its various products and figures (stars, auteurs) attain general social acceptance and approval. In a sense, a circular argument holds here: the popular are mass, the mass are popular. As Turner puts it: 'popular culture and mass media have a symbiotic relationship: each depends on the other in an intimate collaboration' (K. Turner 1984: 4). Contemporary popular culture in the United States and Canada, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand – to mention only the national settings we are primarily concerned with in this study –

forms the majority of mass media content, while the majority of popular culture is transmitted through the mass media.

Commercial forms of popular culture increasingly depend on mass marketing and publicising on a multi-media basis. Mass marketing campaigns promoting a range of products accompany the release of major feature films such as *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace* and *Toy Story*. What we have here is the creation and marketing of a cultural phenomenon, with the cinema film, its video and music soundtrack, the posters, T-shirts, souvenir books, games, and children's toys, not to forget revivals of the original comics, films, or television series which established the popularity of these programmes and their characters. Increasingly, popular films also have 'the making of' programmes accompanying their release. These promotions and their various associated texts are carefully orchestrated, using large-scale advertising, and practices such as nationwide saturation release, achieved by the block booking of cinemas. Tie-ins of related products and the marketing of logos create lucrative secondary incomes; the best-known recent examples being the ubiquitous Pokémon and Teletubbies.

A similar process is evident in the mass marketing of popular music. The music can be reproduced in various formats (or 'texts') – vinyl, audio tape, compact disc, DAT (Digital Audio Tape), and video – and on variations within these: the dance mix, the cassette single, the limited collector's edition, the remastered CD, and so on. The music can then be disseminated in a variety of ways – through radio airplay, discos and nightclubs, television music video shows and MTV-style channels, live concert performances, and the Internet and MP3. Accompanying these can be advertising, reviews of the text or performance, and interviews with the performer(s) in the various publications of the music press. In addition there is the assorted paraphernalia available to the fan, especially the posters and the T-shirts. The range of these products enables a multi-media approach to the marketing of the music, and a maximisation of sales potential, as exposure in each of the various forms strengthens the appeal of the others.

### Culture and the popular

It is already obvious that my use of the term 'culture' rejects the argument that anything popular cannot, by definition, be cultural. Although a high–low culture distinction is still very strongly evident in general public perceptions of 'culture', the traditionally claimed distinction between 'high culture' and 'low culture' has become blurred. High art has been increasingly commodified and commercialised, as with classical music's star system of conductors and soloists, while some forms of popular culture have become more 'respectable', receiving State funding and broader critical acceptance. Yet clear distinctions and cultural hierarchies remain widely held, not

least within particular cultural forms, by those involved in their production and consumption.

My use of the word culture, one of the most difficult words in the English language (see Williams 1983), is in a sociological rather than an aesthetic sense. Williams argues that contemporary usage of 'culture' falls into three possibilities, or some amalgam of these: 'a general process of intellectual, spiritual, and aesthetic development'; 'a particular way of life, whether of a people, period, or a group'; and 'the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity' (Williams 1983: 90). This can be seen as a useful, if overly expansive, definition. Our interest here will be primarily between the second and third of these definitions; and in the relationship between them – the way particular social groups have used popular music within their lives. This is to shift the focus from the preoccupation, evident in much media/cultural studies, with the text in and of itself, to the audience. This is also to stress 'popular culture', rather than accept the reservation of the term culture for artistic pursuits associated with particular values and standards, sometimes referred to as elite or high culture – Williams' third definition. In addition to this emphasis on the audiences and consumption aspects of popular culture, we are concerned with the relationship between the creation of cultural products and the economic context of that creation, a process which involves creating or targeting audiences, and an active engagement between texts and their consumers. This is to recognise that neither texts nor their consumers exist in isolation.

In short then, the main concern of this study is with the interrelationship of context, texts, and consumption, as demonstrated by the manufacture, distribution, and consumption of popular music, primarily in its various recorded forms. But what is popular music?

### Popular music

Popular music defies precise, straightforward definition. Accordingly, some writers on popular music slide over the question of definition, and take a 'common-sense' understanding of the term for granted. Historically, the term popular has meant 'of the ordinary people'. It was first linked in a published title to a certain kind of music that conformed to that criterion in William Chapple's *Popular Music of the Olden Times*, published in instalments from 1855. Not until the 1930s and 1940s did the term start to gain wider currency (Gammond 1991; see also Williams 1983). Middleton (1990) observes that the question of 'what is popular music' is 'so riddled with complexities ... that one is tempted to follow the example of the legendary definition of folk song – all songs are folk songs, I never heard horses sing 'em – and suggest that all music is popular music: popular with someone'. However, the criteria for what counts as popular, and their application to specific musical styles and genres, are open to considerable debate. Classical music clearly has sufficient following to be

considered popular, while, conversely, some forms of popular music are quite exclusive (e.g. thrash metal).

Most definitions are based on identifying the constituent genres making up 'popular music', though views vary on which genres should be included. For instance, *The Penguin Encyclopedia of Popular Music* (Clarke 1990) never attempts to define 'popular music' in any generic sense, instead noting that popular music 'has always been a great mainstream with many tributaries' (Introduction), it deals with an impressive range of these, including jazz, ragtime, blues, rhythm and blues, country, rock (and rock 'n' roll and rockabilly), pub rock, punk rock, acid rock, heavy metal, bubblegum, and reggae. The point that this is a shifting topography is shown by the lack of reference to rap, only just emerging into the mainstream market when Clarke wrote. A similar approach is evident in other attempts to survey the field, most notably the *Rolling Stone* histories of rock 'n' roll (Miller 1980; Ward *et al.* 1986; DeCurtis and Henke 1992), and various consumer record guides to 'rock', a term which became roughly contiguous with 'popular music' post the emergence of rock 'n' roll in the 1950s (AMG 1995; Shapiro 1991; Sinclair 1992). For example, Sinclair (1992: Introduction) observes: 'I have kept my definition of "rock" fairly loose, assuming the scope to cover the more obvious of the country, soul, rap and blues artists whose work has had a significant impact on the rock mainstream'.

Linked to this broad genre approach, are those definitions based on the commercial nature of popular music, and embracing genres perceived as commercially oriented. Many commentators argue that it is commercialisation that is the key to understanding popular music: e.g. 'When we speak of popular music we speak of music that is commercially oriented' (Burnett 1996: 35). This approach places the emphasis on the 'popular', arguing that such appeal can be quantified through charts, radio airplay, and so forth. In such definitions, certain genres are identified as 'popular music', while others are excluded (e.g. Clarke 1990; Garofalo 1997). However, this approach can suffer from the same problems as those stressing popularity, since many genres, especially meta-genres such as world music, have only limited appeal and/or have had limited commercial exposure. Moreover, popularity varies from country to country, and even from region to region within national markets.

It also needs to be noted that this commercially oriented approach is largely concerned with *recorded* popular music, that is usually listened to in a fairly conscious and focused manner. Kassabian makes the useful point that what she terms 'ubiquitous musics' are frequently left out of such discussions: music in films, in stores, on the phone, in the office, on television, and so on. 'These are the kinds of music that no one chooses for herself or himself but that nevertheless wash our everyday lives with sound' (1999: 113). This acoustic wallpaper is also the subject of Joseph Lanza's book *Elevator Music* (1995), while 'Muzak' is a corporate trademark.

A further facet of attempts to define popular music is its relationship to technology, with some writers seeking to maintain a distinction between a 'folk mode' predicated on live performance, and a mass culture form associated with recording. The latter is criticised as 'only commercial ... leaving the profound and innate potential of the medium for cultural and aesthetic expression still undeveloped' (Cutler, cited in Jones 1992: 4). But as Jones points out,

the widespread use of inexpensive multitrack recorders and the spread of home-made cassette networks are giving rise to another form of folk music that fits neither category. Likewise the use of turntables and microphones in rap music contradicts the easy combination of recording and mass culture.

(Jones 1992: 5)

The nature of popular music cannot be simply reduced to whether or not it uses technology. The obvious point here is that those who wish their music to reach a wider audience must record, a process which is increasingly technological in character (see Chapter 3). Further, technology's relationship to popular music can be related to the varying levels of affluence of different social groups. Those without access to instruments are more likely to make music which either doesn't need them, or can be achieved with relatively cheap equipment. Doo-wop, close harmony singing on street corners in the 1950s, needed no instruments. In the 1980s, hip-hop was developed by underprivileged urban blacks, using the voice, the turntable, and cheap drum machines. In comparison, jazz-funk ('fusion') is preferred by many wealthier black musicians, who can afford to purchase and learn instruments (Blake 1992: 42).

Tagg (1982), in an influential and much cited discussion, characterises popular music according to the nature of its distribution (usually mass); how it is stored and distributed (primarily recorded sound rather than oral transmission or musical notation); the existence of its own musical theory and aesthetics; and the relative anonymity of its composers. The last of these is debatable, and I would want to extend the notion of composers and its associated view of the nature of musical creativity (see Chapter 6). However, musicologists have usefully extended the third aspect of this definition, while sociologists have concentrated on the first two dimensions.

It seems that a satisfactory definition of popular music must encompass both musical and socio-economic characteristics. Essentially, all popular music consists of a hybrid of musical traditions, styles, and influences, and is also an economic product which is invested with ideological significance by many of its consumers. At the heart of the majority of various forms of popular music is a fundamental tension between the essential creativity of the act of 'making music' and the commercial nature of the bulk of its production and dissemination (see Frith 1983: chap. 1).

**Rock, pop, and authenticity**

This ongoing tension between art and commerce in popular music is evident in the widely used terms 'pop' and 'rock 'n' roll' (with 'rock' often used as shorthand for the latter, if not both). I have used them somewhat interchangeably here, regarding both as commercially produced music for simultaneous consumption by a mass market. But beyond similarities of production and consumption, aesthetic distinctions and ideological weight are generally attached to these labels: 'in rock, there is the ethos of self-expression which draws an intimate tie between the personal and the performance. ... Rock and pop stars play to different rules' (Street 1986: 5). Hill offers a fuller version of the same sentiments:

Pop implies a very different set of values to rock. Pop makes no bones about being mainstream. It accepts and embraces the requirement to be instantly pleasing and to make a pretty picture of itself. Rock on the other hand, has liked to think it was somehow more profound, non-conformist, self-directed and intelligent.

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To identify particular artists with either pop or rock 'n' roll attempts to keep commerce and artistic integrity apart on a central yardstick. It was part of a tendency in the 1980s (and still evident) to view popular music in terms of a series of dichotomies: mass versus community/local; commerce versus creativity; manufactured versus authentic; major record companies versus independents. This approach was a legacy of the mythology of 'rock' which was a product of the 1960s, when leading American critics – Landau, Marsh, and Christgau – elaborated a view of rock as correlated with authenticity, creativity and a particular political moment: the 1960s protest movement and the counterculture (for example, Marsh 1987). Closely associated with this leftist political ideology of rock was *Rolling Stone* magazine, founded in 1967 (see Chapter 5). The key term in these perspectives was 'authenticity'.

I would argue, however, that the pop/rock distinction was never really valid to any significant extent. As much as anything else, 'rock' has been a marketing device. Even rock's frequent refusal to admit to commodity status, and its attempt to position itself as somehow above the manufacturing process, all too easily become marketing ploys – 'the Revolution is on CBS' slogan of the late 1960s being perhaps the best example. Nevertheless, using authenticity to distinguish between pop and rock continues to serve an important ideological function, helping differentiate particular forms of musical cultural capital.

The 'classic' distinction between rock and pop also runs into difficulties when we consider the various forms of 'alternative' music, illustrating the difficulties of forcing genres into too rigid a typology. Similarly, 'world beat', the rephrasing of traditional

folk music in a dance-pop mode, initially exemplified by Ofra Haza's 'Im Nin Alu' (on *Shaday*, Sire, 1988), has frequently ignored geographical and musical boundaries. These examples illustrate how, in the 1990s, the old 'rock constituency' has splintered even further, continuing a process already evident since the late 1970s and the punk–new wave explosion.

In sum, only the most general definition can be offered under the general umbrella category of 'pop/rock': essentially, it consists of a hybrid of musical traditions, styles, and influences, with the only common element being that it is characterised by a strong rhythmical component, and generally, but not exclusively, relies on electronic amplification. Indeed, a purely musical definition is insufficient, since pop/rock's dominant characteristic is a socio-economic one: its mass production for a mass, predominantly youth, market. At the same time, of course, it is an economic product which is invested with ideological significance by many of its consumers.

As this discussion suggests, as with a term like 'popular culture', it is misguided to attempt to attach too precise a meaning to what is a shifting cultural phenomenon. For convenience, and despite its own associated difficulties (see my Introduction), I use the term 'popular music' throughout this study as shorthand for the diverse range of popular music genres produced in commodity form for a mass, predominantly youth, market, primarily Anglo-American in origin (or imitative of its forms), since the early 1950s.

**Critical media literacy**

The study of popular music is part of the more general project of critical cultural studies: to 'read' the commercial media in a critical manner, in order to acquire media literacy. Literacy is still generally understood as a shorthand for the social practices and conceptions of reading and writing (with reading still equated with print media). Media literacy essentially involves a process of 'reading' the popular media, be it print, visual or aural, in a critical manner. Media literacy emphasises the development of critical autonomy, enabling students 'to establish and maintain the kind of critical distance on their culture that makes possible critical autonomy: the ability to decode, encode, and evaluate the symbol systems that dominate their world' (Ontario Ministry of Education 1989: 10). This is a view which has much in common with other media educators who see the dominant purpose of media studies as ideological demystification (Masterman 1989).

The arguments in support of media literacy are various, but centrally involve two facts of contemporary life, already touched on in our discussion of 'popular culture'. First, the mass/popular media's saturation of society, and the high levels of its consumption among young people; and, second, the pervasive influence of these media, which act as 'consciousness industries'.

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The obvious argument for a media literacy which encompasses the development

in the learner of a critical perspective on all popular media, be they print, visual, or aural, is the sheer pervasiveness of such media and its enormous appeal among the young. The experience of most of us is saturated by the popular mass media: I wake up, shower and dress to the clock radio and the (New Zealand) National Programme's 'Morning Report', and during breakfast catch up on the weather forecast and the local radio news. If driving to work, depending on traffic delays, I listen to music tapes or the radio. My working day begins with checking my e-mail, and, classes and student consultations aside, frequently encompasses sessions of previewing audio or video recordings, checking web sites, and breaks to catch up on recent journals and newspapers. In the early evenings I may watch television or a video, play music, sometimes on the headphones, or go to a movie, while the late evening usually sees me in bed with 'a good read'. All of this means a considerable level of media consumption, and, as Masterman observes, 'the real significance of these different uses of the media is that they are frequently integrated not simply with other activities but with one another', via different levels of engagement – flicking through a magazine or the paper, while watching television (Masterman 1989: 3). It is also important to note that they vary from activities which isolate the individual (headphones, reading), to home-based entertainments usually shared with others (television, video), and social forms outside the home – going to the 'movies' with one's partner/family/friends.

Some idea of people's level of engagement with the popular media is provided by the US Census Bureau, which found that in 1999 the average American above the age of eighteen spent 3,405 hours on consuming media and entertainment products; or roughly some eight hours per day! (Greco 2000: v; of course, such statistics beg the question of the nature of such 'consumption'). The consumption of popular media is particularly high among young people. In the United Kingdom, a survey of homes found children and teenagers had almost universal access to audio equipment of some kind (Livingston and Bovill 1999).

The second core argument for media literacy is the sheer influence of the media, reflecting its pervasiveness and high levels of consumption. As is frequently pointed out by commentators, the media operate as consciousness industries, shaping our perceptions, values and norms, and confirming or denying these. This process involves delivering audiences to advertisers, and, in the case of television, presenting an apparently transparent window on the world. While official and public attention tends to focus on the 'effects' of various media in terms of its perceived links to violence and sexuality, the general ideological effects of the media are less obvious and less addressed. It can be readily seen that the majority of codes and practices operating within popular media texts are frequently reinforcing and reproducing dominant interests in society; for example, the representation in television news and press coverage of disputes between capital and labour (see the work of the Glasgow

Media Studies Group). At the same time, however, within this dominant discourse there exist spaces and possibilities for opposition, resistance and alternative messages.

Despite the pervasiveness of the popular mass media, schooling continues to be preoccupied with teaching 'high culture'. We often find embedded in school curricula and teaching practices the assumption that the only 'culture' worth transmitting is that of a national and classless 'high' culture, of equal relevance to all pupils. The school curriculum has often been a selection from the cultural experiences and artifacts available, a selection which generally embodies two attitudes: Arnold's 'the best that has been thought and said'; and a critique of the mass communications industry which uses education to 'inoculate' pupils against the fatal charms of mass/pop culture: the seduction of advertising, the sexism of rock videos and so on.

Accordingly, children's preferred media are frequently at odds with the school curriculum. This situation is changing, with media studies now a firmly established part of the curriculum in a number of countries – including New Zealand, several Australian states, Canada (notably Ontario), and the United Kingdom. Media studies programmes usually reflect, implicitly rather than explicitly, the dominant theoretical perspective(s) by which they are underpinned. Generally, there is a tendency to privilege one aspect of the media: context, text, or audiences. What is needed, I have argued throughout this study, is an approach which links these three central aspects, an approach best achieved through a consideration of the question: 'who/what is determining meaning in popular culture?' In a sense, then, *Understanding Popular Music* is an attempt to provide a basis for the study of 'popular' music as part of a critical media literacy.

Media literacy, with its concentration on popular culture, or mass media produced for a mass audience, challenges the traditional emphasis on high culture and the preoccupation with print media. In its place, it emphasises the critical consideration of the various forms and genres of popular media, in terms of their nature as commercial and ideological texts, their constructions of reality, the nature of their consumption, and attempts to regulate them. It is to these we now turn.

## ANALYSING THE POPULAR

The study of popular music is situated in the general field of cultural studies, which addresses the interaction between three dimensions of popular culture: lived cultures, the social being of those who consume popular cultures; the *symbolic forms*, or texts, that are consumed within the lived culture; and the *economic institutions* and technological processes which create the texts.

Analysis of the interrelationship of these dimensions raises a series of complex issues, including:

- 1 The tension between the economic, market determinants of popular culture and the consumer sovereignty exercised by those who actually buy, view, read, and listen to mass-marketed television, films, magazines, bestsellers, and popular music.
- 2 The nature of lived cultures and the interrelationships between particular cultural preferences and factors such as class, gender, ethnicity and age.
- 3 The ideological role of popular culture in perpetuating dominant values, and the possibilities for subverting and opposing such preferred readings.
- 4 The nature of the appeal of popular culture (the pleasures of the text), and its role as a form of cultural capital.
- 5 The frequent 'moral panic' reaction to popular culture, and the associated notions of 'effects' and causality at work in such episodes.

Obviously, while these questions have been framed separately here, they are far from discrete. Further, we can only indicate here in shorthand fashion, issues which have been the subject of extended debates in cultural theory (see the useful overviews in Edgar and Sedgwick 1999; O'Sullivan *et al.* 1994).

### Market determination and consumer sovereignty

As already observed, popular culture products are generally mass produced for a mass market, with that production process dominated in most spheres by a few large companies. Consider the highly lucrative international market for pop/rock music. This is currently dominated by a small group of 'majors' or multinational companies: British based EMI; BMG (Bertelsmann Group, Germany); Sony Music Entertainment (Japan); Warner Music Group (USA); and Universal/Polygram (USA, Holland).

The move into Hollywood by Japanese corporate capital since the late 1980s is a clear indication of the ongoing battle for global dominance of media markets. This battle reflects companies' attempts to control both hardware and software markets, and distribute their efforts across a range of media products – a process traditionally termed 'vertical integration', but now labelled 'synergy' – which enables maximisation of product tie-ins and marketing campaigns and, consequently, profits. As commentator Nigel Cope observed after Sony purchased both CBS Records (for \$2 billion) in 1988 and Columbia Pictures (for \$3.4 billion) in 1989:

Now Sony can control the whole chain. Its broadcast equipment division manufactures the studio cameras and the film on which movies are produced; in Columbia it owns a studio that makes them and, crucially, determines the formats on which they are distributed. That means it can have movies made on

high definition televisions, and videoed with Sony VCRs. It can re-shoot Columbia's 2700-film library on 8mm film, for playing on its video Walkmans.

(Cope 1990: 56)

Such moves reflected the economies of scale and global integration required to compete on the world media market in the 1990s (Heiman and McChesney 1997). Some commentators see the natural corollary of such concentrations of ownership as an ability to essentially determine, or at the very least strongly influence, the nature of the market's desire or demand for particular forms of popular culture. On the other hand, more optimistic media analysts, with a preference for human agency, emphasise the individual consumers' freedom to choose, their ability to decide how and where cultural texts are to be used, and the meanings and messages to be associated with them (see Chapter 2).

The debate in this area is one of emphasis, since clearly both sets of influences or determinations are in operation, and it is a question of integrating rather than opposing them. For example, if I want to purchase a record, and have the necessary money to do so, I can make a 'free choice' from the records held at the local shops; however, this freedom is seriously constrained by the availability of particular formats and genres in the stores (unless, of course, I have access to the Internet and a credit card – see Chapter 3). I will certainly be able to purchase the latest charting performers on album, audio tape, or CD, and even in some cases as a video; but the retailer may well not have a relatively obscure blues musician on a small independent label, particularly if it is only putting the artist out on vinyl.

### Cultural capital: lived cultures and cultural preferences

The comprehensive investigations of Pierre Bourdieu have showed how different cultural texts, practices, and values may be accorded differing worth among various social groups, thereby constituting forms of cultural capital (see especially Bourdieu 1984). Such work also illustrates that while the contemporary mass media are 'popular' in the sense of being a widely shared experience, they are arguably less class-specific than traditional cultural forms, and their appeal is more complexly based. As already suggested, mass media are frequently associated with popular or 'mass culture', commercially provided forms of leisure and entertainment. While such products are directed at all sections of the community, they are not, as some critics maintain, undifferentiated. Various forms of mass/popular culture in fact address different target audiences; further, they are actively mediated by these audiences in terms of their cultural experiences, age, and class, ethnic, and gender locations. For example, a piece of 'gangsta' rap music by Ice-T will be received very differently by an inner-city ghetto young black male (arguably the genre's primary target audience), and a middle-class suburban white woman. The woman would probably find the

idiom itself 'boring', its sexism offensive and its 'blackness' threatening. For the black youth, however, the music would speak to his general economic experience of powerlessness, while asserting his black masculinity and perceived gender superiority within his ethnic group. This is to see the audience's social position as a mitigating factor in determining 'taste'.

As Bourdieu has observed, 'nothing more clearly affirms one's class, nothing more infallibly classifies, than tastes in music' (1984: 18). Academic sociology was initially slow to explore the relationship between popular music and its largely adolescent consumers, but there is now a history of studies exploring youth's tastes in music and factors such as class background, ethnicity, gender, location, and attitudes towards school (see Chapter 11). Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital has been usefully reworked and applied to various patterns and styles of music preferences (e.g. Thornton's discussion of club cultures in the UK).

### Culture, ideology, and preferred readings

Another point of debate around popular culture is its ideological role in reinforcing or reproducing dominant values. Writers who concentrate on the text itself, often using concepts from semiotic and psychoanalytic analysis, argue that there frequently exists in the text a 'preferred reading', that is, a dominant message set within the cultural code of established conventions and practices of the producers and transmitters of the text.

This assumes that there is a dominant culture, a view strongly debated in cultural theory. Even if we accept the notion of ideologically dominant values, and while some consumers may, at least implicitly or subconsciously, 'buy into' the preferred readings containing these values, it must be kept in mind that it is not necessarily true that the audience as a whole do so. In particular, subordinate groups may reinterpret such textual messages, making 'sense' of them in a different way. This opens up the idea of popular resistance to, and subversion of, dominant cultures.

The 'meaning' of any engagement between a text and its consumers cannot be assumed, or 'read off', from textual characteristics alone. The text's historical conditions of production and consumption are important, as is the nature of its audience, and the various ways in which they mediate their encounter with the text. Conversely, nor can meaning be simply read off from the structural location of the consumer. Text and audiences interact. Herman and Hoare (1979) point to a number of examples of this occurring with popular music texts: the Strawbs' 'Part of the Union', intended as a direct attack on trade unionism, achieved the opposite effect when sung by Coventry car workers, while a traditional ballad, 'You'll Never Walk Alone', taken up by Liverpool Football Club supporters became an anthem of solidarity. As they conclude: 'Because records are interpreted, because they stimulate song, their consumption is not merely passive. A song's meaning is not immutable,

independent of context' (Herman and Hoare 1979: 53). The study of 'pop' music fans also reminds us that cultural meanings are ultimately made by consumers, even if this process is under conditions and opportunities not of their own choosing (see Chapter 11).

### The pleasures of the text

Some audience commentators will admit to being 'addicted' to popular culture, the use of addicted conveying here a hint of guilty pleasures, an abdication of aesthetic judgement through the implied suggestion that 'I couldn't help myself'. Yet to enjoy Batman and Darth Vader, ER and the Simpsons, Madonna and Springsteen, Raymond Chandler's Marlow and Robert Parker's Spenser, is to simply acknowledge that we are all immersed in popular culture, and that it plays a significant role in our lives. This is the case even with those who largely reject it, in part because the production of popular culture frequently subsidises the economic ability to meet minority market tastes. For example, some 90 per cent of recorded music sold is pop/rock music and its associated genres, the income from this core market arguably in effect subsidising the smaller market for musical forms such as classical and jazz.

The above list of popular culture heroes and texts indicates the word-games played by adherents. To be able to participate in the morning coffee-break ritual of discussing last evening's television programmes ('Wasn't George Clooney great in that emergency room scene in ER?'), presupposes a knowledge of the particular programme, its main characters and narrative dynamics. The process is a similar one with music fans' arguments over the relative merits of artists, or the various works of a particular performer: 'Surely you'd agree that Dylan's 1960s albums are superior to his subsequent work?' The insider is able to join in the game, provided he or she has the necessary background knowledge – cultural capital – to do so. All this is part of what has been termed the pleasures of the text, the ability to identify with particular forms of popular culture and a familiarity with its codes and conventions, thereby contributing to an aesthetic and emotional enjoyment of the form.

The pleasures of the text can also be physical: the solitary pleasures of being absorbed in 'a good read', creating an oasis of privacy and self isolation among family routines and distractions; the sheer tactile pleasure of handling record albums, with the accompanying rituals of setting the scene for listening, cleaning the record, and studying anew the sleeve notes; and the physical pleasures of those forms of popular culture which involve active participation, most notably dance. Then there are the emotional pleasures to be derived from both the anticipation and consumption of familiar pleasures: a well-loved record or film, a favourite author or television programme, or another concert by a favourite performer. *Frequently, such pleasure includes an element of catharsis, the release from everyday tensions and concerns as we are 'lost' in the moment of consumption. There is the social dimension to all this,*

where consumption takes place with friends, family and lovers, and provides a context for the pursuit of other agendas, from catching up on gossip, to the time-honoured 'back row of the pictures' – now probably replaced by the lounge sofa and the rented video, or the Internet chat room! Consumption as a social activity brings into play the individual's knowledge of the text, which provides a focal point for much of the in-group or personal discussion.

### Popular culture, 'effects' and moral panic

The audience reaction to popular culture/mass media has frequently provoked anxiety among those concerned for social stability and social order. In England in the nineteenth century, popular culture (sometimes referred to as 'folk culture') was associated with the customs, rituals, values and beliefs of working-class and lower middle-class groups. The middle classes largely conceived of these lower-class beliefs and behaviours as annoying, wasteful, immoral, and, at times, threatening and dangerous. Accordingly there emerged a desire to regulate and control popular culture, particularly those expressions of it associated with crowds, public spaces, noise, excessive drinking and violence.

The degree of success the Victorian ruling class enjoyed in this project, and working-class resistance to it, is beyond our scope here, but since the turn of the century, concern over the impact of popular culture has periodically surfaced with the advent of each new mass medium – silent cinema and the talkies, dime novels and comics, television, rock 'n' roll music, and video. The controversy surrounding the introduction of each popular medium frequently represented a form of moral panic; that is, the social concern generated by them was greatly exaggerated, and the perceived threat to social harmony was by no means as ominous as many regarded it. Such moral panics were episodes in cultural politics, in part representing struggles to maintain dominant norms and values. Popular culture was seen by its critics as diametrically opposed to 'high' culture and something to be regulated, particularly in the interests of the susceptible young.

Such debates have been preoccupied with the perceived negative effects of popular culture, and are generally based on simple notions of causality. Television provides the clearest recent example of this, but popular music has provided its own series of moral panics, from the teds and bodgies of the 1950s, to the mods and rockers of the 1960s, punk in the 1970s, goths in the 1980s, and gangsta rappers and rave culture in the 1990s (see Chapter 12).

### READING POPULAR MUSIC

At this point, to place the discussion which follows in context, I address the various approaches and attitudes towards popular music displayed in the critical literature.

Six dominant points of entry can be identified: a high cultural, conservative critique and dismissal of popular music; the closely allied mass culture critique of the Frankfurt School; political economy; the structuralist-oriented approach of musicology; culturalist perspectives including populist positions and subcultural analysis; and contemporary discussions of popular music as a leading example of postmodernist cultural theory. These perspectives in turn reflect major approaches to cultural analysis. Of course, these broad labels are no more than cursory signposts in what is a complex field, with considerable intermixing of intellectual traditions. (For fuller discussions of approaches to culture, and cultural studies, see Johnson 1979; Swingewood 1977; Turner 1994; Grossberg *et al.* 1992.)

### High culture and popular music

The high-culture tradition is essentially a conservative one. It encompasses a defence of a narrowly defined high or elite 'culture', in the classic sense of Arnold's 'the best that has been thought and said' (Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, 1869). This is an artistic conception of culture: the only real and authentic culture is art, against which everything else is set. It offers a mass society thesis, in which the valued civilised culture of an elite minority is constantly under attack from a majority or mass culture which is unauthentic and a denial of (the good?) life. Its main task in analysis is evaluation and discrimination – a search for the true values of civilisation, commonly to be found in Renaissance art, the great nineteenth-century novels, and so on.

A version of this view is ably expressed by Peter Abbs, most fully in his book *Reclamations* (1975). The very title of this study indicates its author's concern to return to an educational emphasis on the practice of discrimination, selection, and evaluation. Abbs uses the term 'mass-culture', which he regards as more satisfactory than 'popular culture', since 'unlike traditional folk-culture (which it often seeks to simulate) mass-culture is not made by the populace, nor does it generally express the authentic experience of a particular people' (53). Mass culture refers to the manufacture of culture as a commodity on a massive scale to mass markets for massive profits (78), and, as such, clearly includes much popular music. Mass/popular culture, for Abbs, represents a form of cultural debasement, epitomised by its trivialising of the emotions:

In true culture we invariably find a high degree of specificity, a strong sense of context, of time and of location, a sense of unique relationships, of binding existential meanings; in false culture we tend to find the reverse, we find a high degree of generality in which all things prickly, problematic and diverse have been conveniently dissolved.

(Abbs 1975: 53)

This passage epitomises the conservative critique of popular culture: its perceived lack of authenticity and its triviality, attributable to its mass commodification for the lowest common denominator, and its debasement of the emotions and human relationships.

Such high cultural critiques of popular culture have frequently reserved their most vehement efforts for popular music. Writing in 1839, Sir John Herschel claimed:

Music and dancing (the more's the pity) have become so closely associated with ideas of riot and debauchery among the less cultivated classes, that a taste for them, for their own sakes, can hardly be said to exist, and before they can be recommended as innocent or safe amusements, a very great change of ideas must take place.

(cited Frith 1983: 39)

Through the 1950s and 1960s, there were a succession of commentators who regarded much popular music as mindless fodder, cynically manufactured for mindless youthful consumers. In his best-selling book *The Closing of the American Mind*, Allan Bloom argued that rock music presents life as 'a nonstop commercial prepackaged masturbational fantasy', which he charges as responsible for the atrophy of the minds and bodies of youth (Bloom 1987).

Underpinning such views are assumptions about the potentially disruptive nature of 'the popular', and the need for social control and the regulation of popular pleasures. The high culture view of popular culture has been criticised for failing to recognise the active nature of popular culture consumption; failing to treat the cultural forms seriously on their own terms; biased by aesthetic prejudices, which are rarely explicated; and resting on outmoded class-based notions of a high-low culture split. The traditionally claimed distinctions between high and low culture have become blurred. High art has been increasingly commodified and commercialised, while some forms of popular culture have become more 'respectable', receiving State funding and broader critical acceptance.

The high culture perspective remains evident in the application of aesthetics to popular music, and the tendency of musicology to ignore or dismiss popular music genres. It also underpins some State attitudes towards the funding and regulation of cultural forms. At an everyday level, it is implicit in the manner in which musicians, fans and critics make distinctions of value both between and within particular genres.

### Popular music and the mass society

Though politically on the left, the influential 'Frankfurt School' of social theory has a good deal in common with the high culture conservative commentators. The

Frankfurt theorists criticised mass culture in general, arguing that under a capitalist system of production, culture had become simply another object, the 'culture industry', devoid of critical thought and any oppositional possibilities. This general view was applied more specifically to popular music by Adorno, especially in his attacks on Tin Pan Alley and jazz. When Adorno published his initial critique 'On Popular Music' in 1941, the music of the big bands filled the airwaves and charts, operating within the Tin Pan Alley system of songwriting that had been dominant since the early 1900s, characterised by simple rhyming formulas and harmonies.

At the heart of Adorno's critique was the standardisation associated with the capitalist system of commodity production:

A clear judgement concerning the relation of serious to popular music can be arrived at only by strict attention to the fundamental characteristic of popular music: standardization. The whole structure of popular music is standardized even where the attempt is made to circumvent standardization.

(Adorno 1941: 17)

In this essay and his subsequent writings on popular music, Adorno continued to equate the form with Tin Pan Alley and jazz-oriented variations of it, ignoring the rise of rock 'n' roll in the early 1950s (Adorno 1976). This undermined his critique and resulted in his views generally being strongly rejected by more contemporary analysts of popular music (see, for example, Frith 1983: 43–8; and the section below on populist perspectives).

Gendron forcefully recapitulates 'the failings' of Adorno's theory, particularly his exaggeration of the presence of industrial standardisation in popular music, but also suggests that 'Adorno's analysis of popular music is not altogether implausible', and merits reconsideration (Gendron 1986). To support this argument, Gendron examines the standardisation of the vocal group style doo-wop, rooted in the black gospel quartet tradition, which had a major chart impact between 1955 and 1959. So far, so good, but he then asserts: 'What is true for doo-wop also holds true for other rock 'n' roll genres: rockabilly, heavy metal, funk etc.' This claim is not teased out, and runs counter to the clear differentiation that is evident within genres such as heavy metal and techno/dance music (see Chapter 8).

What happens when you read, hear or view something is that you mediate the experience; further, this process of mediation is not purely at an individual, psychological level, but is influenced by the context within which the activity occurs. It is that context, especially its economic dimension, that is the focus of political economy.

**Music as political economy**

The political economy approach to the popular/mass media has as its starting point the fact that the producers of mass media are industrial institutions essentially driven by the logic of capitalism: the pursuit of maximum profit. The fact that these institutions are owned and controlled by a relatively small number of people, and that many of the largest-scale firms are based in the United States, is a situation involving considerable ideological power. Schiller (1999) has traced the pervasive and increasing inequality in access to information and cultural products due to the commercialisation and privatisation of broadcasting, libraries, higher education, and other areas of public discourse. Commenting on the United States, Bagdikian (1997) observes how 'a small number of the country's largest industrial corporations have acquired more public communications power than any private business has ever before possessed in world history', together creating 'a new communications cartel'. The music industry has been part of this process of consolidation of 'imperial corporations' (Barnett and Cavanagh 1994). At issue is the consequent question of control of the media and whose interests it operates in, and the relationship between diversity and innovation in the market.

Classical political economy analysis (the Frankfurt School is, arguably, an example), tended to devalue the significance of culture, seeing it primarily as the reflection of the economic base of society. The influence of political economy is evident in the argument of those contemporary Marxists who emphasise the power of corporate capitalism to manipulate and even construct markets and audiences:

More than any of the other performing arts, the world of song is dominated by the money men on the one hand and the moral censors of the media on the other. The possibility of alternative voices making themselves heard is always small and at times, such as now, non-existent. The illusion is that song is a freely available commodity. ... The reality is that song is the private property of business organisations.

(Rosselson 1979: 40)

The picture of a powerful corporate capitalist music industry, able to manipulate and even construct markets and audiences, stresses how the music business is now an integral part of a global network of leisure and entertainment corporations, typified by a quest for media synergy and profit maximisation (Barnett and Cavanagh 1994). An extension of this is the classic form of the cultural imperialism thesis, popularised in the 1970s, which implied that mass manufactured popular culture, primarily from the US, is swamping the integrity and vitality of local cultural forms.

Such positions can all too easily slip into a form of economic determinism, married to (capitalist) conspiracy theory; seeing culture as produced by economic relations,

and omitting any sense of the relative autonomy of the superstructure. They ignore the crucial point, already made but worth reiterating, that the consumption of music is not (necessarily) a passive activity. Classical political economy also tends to overlook or negate the many instances of oppositional politics in rock music, including the symbolic revolt of subcultural lifestyles, 'conscience rock', and the didactic use of song lyrics (see the reply to Rosselson from Herman and Hoare 1979; and Chapter 12).

Contemporary political economy theorists have become more sophisticated in their appreciation of the reciprocal relationships between base and superstructure. Media institutions have been examined by asking of media texts: who produces the text? For what audience? In whose interests? What is excluded? Such an interrogation necessitates examining particular media in terms of their production practices, financial bases, technology, legislative frameworks, and their construction of audiences. As regards global cultural consumption, the classic cultural imperialism view has undergone major revision, with the status of the 'local' and its relationship to globalisation being seen in more complex and dynamic terms (see Wallis and Malm 1984; Robinson *et al.* 1991; and the discussion in Chapter 4). This new work has reasserted the importance of political economy, which has come into its own in the last decade in reframing popular music studies.

**Structuralism and musicology**

Structuralist views of popular culture/media concentrate on how meaning is generated in media texts, examining how the 'structure' of the text (visual, verbal, or auditory) produces particular ideological meanings. Such study is primarily through semiotics, the study of signs, a method which attempts to establish how the various elements of a text combine to present a 'preferred reading' (or a most likely, or dominant, message or meaning) for the consumer (viewer, listener, or reader). Such an approach involves systematically uncovering the various layers of meaning in a text. At its most sophisticated (or esoteric, depending on your point of view), this involves the application of psychoanalysis, in conjunction with semiotics, to examine how media texts shape the individual unconscious of the consumer. Structuralist media theory, for example, will refer to how films and television programmes 'position the viewer' and 'construct subjectivity' in accordance with certain ideological positions.

The musicological approach can be regarded as a structuralist form of cultural analysis, since it privileges the text by placing the emphasis firmly on its formal properties. Musicologists tackle genres such as pop and rock as music, using conventional tools derived from the study of more traditional/classical forms of music: harmony, melody, beat, rhythm, and the lyric. Academic musicology, however, remains sparse (see Mellers 1986; Shepherd 1991; Middleton 1990), and has had limited impact on popular music criticism. This state of affairs reflects most 'non-classical' musicians' and rock critics' general lack of formal musical training, and the latter's preoccupation

with the 'sociology of rock'. The obvious difficulty with the musicological approach is that the preoccupation with the text in and of itself omits any consideration of music as a social phenomenon. The music itself becomes a disembodied presence, lacking any social referents.

Indeed, it can be argued that much popular music is largely a music of the body and emotions, and its influence cannot easily be reduced to a simple consideration of its formal musical qualities. Attempts to do so can all too easily become pretentious, as shown by Frith's comparison of two explanations of the Animals' 1964 hit 'I'm Crying'. Richard Middleton, a musicologist, emphasises in his explanation the formal musical qualities of the composition, including the point that:

The cross relations in the ostinato (which is melodic and harmonic) are the equivalents of blue notes, arising from a similar conflict between melodic and tonal implications. The modal melodic movement of the ostinato, with its minor thirds, clashes with the tonal need for major triads imposed by the 12-bar blues structure.

(cited Frith 1983: 13)

Compare this with Alan Price's description: 'I wrote the music and Eric (Burdon) did the words and we just threw it together in rehearsal in Blackpool. We just stuck it together and recorded it and by chance it was successful' (ibid.).

Such examples aside, musicology deserves a better press than it has received, and we can point to a number of recent examples of its helpful application to popular music (e.g. Moore 1993; Brackett 1995; Covach and Boone 1997); its value, and its application to particular texts, are examined in Chapter 8.

### Culturalism and popular music

Culturalist perspectives on popular culture have examined the question of how the media actually undertake the production of 'consent' for social, economic and political structures which favour the maintenance of dominant interests (see, for example, the early work of Stuart Hall). Those working in this area have been markedly influenced by the ideas of the Italian Marxist theoretician, Antonio Gramsci, particularly the concept of ideological hegemony, advanced by Gramsci to explain how a ruling class maintains its dominance through achieving a popular consensus mediated through the various institutions of society, including the schools, mass media, the law, religion and popular culture. Ideological hegemony thus represents the organisation of consent, a process underpinned by the threat of actual physical coercion by the State. An important aspect of hegemony is that it mystifies and conceals existing power relations and social arrangements. Particular ideas and rules are constructed as natural and universal 'common sense' and the popular media

play a leading role in this process. However, hegemony is never absolute, but is instead constantly being challenged and redefined.

Those who stress the consumption of popular music as an active, rather than a passive process, who identify the many instances of oppositional politics in popular music, and who emphasise the tensions and contradictions at work within the music industry can be broadly described as 'culturalist'. In the writing on popular music, culturalism is best represented by the work on music and youth subcultures associated with the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (BCCCS) during the 1970s (Willis 1978; Hebdige 1979; Hall and Jefferson 1976). This broad body of work emphasised the place of the individual in the determination of cultural meaning. For example, Chambers's theme is the constant interplay between commercial factors and lived experience:

For after the commercial power of the record companies has been recognised, after the persuasive sirens of the radio acknowledged, after the recommendations of the music press noted, it is finally those who buy the records, dance to the rhythm and live to the beat who demonstrate, despite the determined conditions of its production, the wider potential of pop.

(Chambers 1985: Introduction)

In similar fashion, Middleton (1990) places popular music in the space of contradiction and contestation lying between the 'imposed' and the 'authentic', and also emphasises the relative autonomy of cultural practices.

### Postmodern rock

Finally, the impact of postmodernism needs to be acknowledged, with its challenge to the established notions of representation in the verbal and visual spheres. Postmodernism seeks to blur, if not totally dissolve the traditional oppositions and boundaries between the aesthetic and the commercial, between art and the market, and between high and low culture. The precise nature of postmodernism, however, proves hard to pin down, and there is a marked lack of clarity and consistency in all the varying usages of the term.

In a key early contribution, 'Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', Jameson overviews postmodernism as the cultural expression of a new phase of capitalism, characterised by communications technologies facilitating the virtually instantaneous shifting of international capital, the emergence of new centres of capital (e.g. Japan) in a global economy, new class formations breaking with the traditional labour versus capital division, and a consumer capitalism which markets style, images and tastes as much as actual products. *The commodification of culture has resulted in a new populism of the mass media, a culture centred around*

the marketing and consumption of surfaces and appearances, epitomised by the ubiquity of commercial television (Jameson 1984; see also the writing of French postmodern theorists Baudrillard and Lyotard).

Despite its obvious plausibility as a general explanation of developments in popular culture, postmodernism suffers from a number of difficulties. To heavily generalise (since, as already stated, postmodernism is hardly a unitary theoretical position), these are: its frequent lack of specificity; its over-preoccupation with texts and audiences at the expense of locating these within the economic and productive context within which cultural products reside; its reduction of history and politics and its ignorance of 'traditional' sociological notions of production, class and ideology (see Milner 1991).

A form of postmodern thesis was popular in the 1980s with academic commentators on popular music, who saw the music, once associated with youthful rebellion and political activism, as now thoroughly commercialised and incorporated into the postmodernist capitalist order. What was once revolt had become style. In his collected essays, *Music for Pleasure* (1988b), and in his contribution to his edited volume *Facing The Music* (1988a), Simon Frith suggested the arrival of a curious entity, postmodernist pop, a value-free zone where aesthetic judgements are outweighed by whether a band can get its video on MTV and its picture in *Smash Hits*. In an analysis of a number of major contemporary pop stars, Hill echoed Adorno's critique of popular music as manufactured mass culture. Appropriately subtitled 'Manufacturing the '80s Pop Dream', Hill's study of performers such as Michael Jackson, Duran Duran, and Madonna, argued that 'this fresh species of genuinely talented practitioners are *ready and willing* to manufacture themselves' (his emphasis), and that 'never before have commerce and creativity so happily held hands' (Hill 1986: 9). While both Frith and Hill concede that 'rock' has always been about more than just music, they argued that it had never been more so, and was now increasingly subverted to the services of commercialism. This is to misrepresent the history of popular music, which has always been at least partly about style, and, once again, downplays the continued political force of many of its constituent genres.

More recently, the application of postmodernism to popular music is primarily based on two perceived trends: first, the increasing evidence of pastiche, intertextuality, and eclecticism; and, second, increased cultural fusion and the collapsing of high-low culture type distinctions in rock. Postmodernist views of music videos, for example, frequently regard it as exemplifying the collapse of traditional distinctions between art and the commercial, the aesthetic and the unaesthetic, and the authentic and unauthentic (e.g. Kaplan 1987). However, this conflation of postmodernism and music video is open to serious question, with music television, if anything, actually becoming more traditional in form during the later 1990s.

In addition to music television such as MTV, Goodwin (1991; also 1993) identi-

fies a number of points where the debate around postmodernism intersects with popular music: the music itself, where claims are made for textual exemplars of postmodernism; the use of sampling and pastiche; the emergence of particular social formations of consumers 'which celebrate pastiche and ahistorical modes of consumption' (175); and 'postmodern rock' as a sales category. In his insightful analysis of these, Goodwin concludes that 'while it is possible to discover categories of post-modern music and perhaps practices of postmodern consumption, the grand claims of postmodern theory remain insubstantial as an account of the current state of popular music' (Goodwin 1991: 174). Almost a decade later, there is little evidence to contest this view (see Longhurst 1995; Gracyk 1996: 220-6).

The general approach adopted in *Understanding Popular Music* draws primarily from critical media theory, particularly its contemporary political economy and culturalist strands. Popular cultural texts are regarded as dynamic not static, mediated both by patterns of economic and social organisation and the relationship of individuals and social groups to these patterns. This puts politics in a position of central importance, as culture is viewed as a site of conflict and struggle, of negotiations which constantly confirm and redefine the existing conditions of domination and subordination in society. Against the backdrop of these cultural studies' signposts, the construction of meaning in popular music can be seen as embracing a number of factors: the music industry and its associated technologies, those who create the music, the nature of musical texts, the constitution of audiences and their modes of consumption, and attempts to influence and regulate all of these. The role of the music industry, in its drive to commodify its performers and texts, and to maximise profits, is the starting point for analysing popular music.