

Symbolic creativity

The institutions and practices, genres and terms of high art are currently categories of exclusion more than of inclusion. They have no real connection with most young people or their lives. They may encourage some artistic specializations but they certainly discourage much wider and more general symbolic creativity. The official existence of the 'arts' in institutions seems to exhaust everything else of its artistic contents. If some things count as 'art', the rest must be 'non-art'. Because 'art' is in the 'art gallery', it can't therefore be anywhere else. It is that which is special and heightened, not ordinary and everyday.

The arts establishment, by and large, has done little to dispel these assumptions. It prefers instead to utilize or even promote fears of cultural decline and debasement in order to strengthen its own claims for subsidy, institutional protection and privilege. In general the arts establishment connives to keep alive the myth of the special, creative individual artist holding out against passive mass consumerism, so helping to maintain a self-interested view of elite creativity.

Against this we insist that there is a vibrant symbolic life and symbolic creativity in everyday life, everyday activity and expression – even if it is sometimes invisible, looked down on or spurned. We don't want to invent it or propose it. We want to recognize it – literally re-cognize it. Most young people's lives are not involved with the arts and yet are actually full of expressions, signs and symbols through which individuals and groups seek creatively to establish their presence, identity and meaning. Young people are all the time expressing or attempting to express something about their actual or potential *cultural significance*. This is the realm of living common culture. Vulgar sometimes, perhaps. But also 'common' in being everywhere, resistant, hardy. Also

'common' in being shared, having things 'in common'. Where 'arts' exclude, 'culture' includes. 'Art' has been cut short of meanings, where 'culture' has not.

As Raymond Williams always insisted, culture is ordinary.¹ It is the extraordinary in the ordinary, which is extraordinary, which makes both into culture, common culture. We are thinking of the extraordinary symbolic creativity of the multitude of ways in which young people use, humanize, decorate and invest with meanings their common and immediate life spaces and social practices – personal styles and choice of clothes; selective and active use of music, TV, magazines; decoration of bedrooms; the rituals of romance and subcultural styles; the style, banter and drama of friendship groups; music-making and dance. Nor are these pursuits and activities trivial or inconsequential. In conditions of late modernization and the widespread crisis of cultural values they can be crucial to the creation and sustenance of individual and group identities, even to cultural survival of identity itself. There is work, even desperate work, in their play.

The arts institution

The existence, reproduction and appreciation of the high arts or 'official arts' depends on institutions, from individual art galleries, museums, theatres, ballet companies to the Arts Council itself. But institutions include not only buildings and organizations, but also systematic and specific social values and practices. The appreciation of official art (its consumption) further depends on the acquisition of certain kinds of knowledge and therefore on a prior educational process lodged within its own kinds of institutions. That is, the taste for art is learned.

The conventional list of 'high art' includes classical music, ballet, opera, drama, poetry, literature, the visual and plastic arts. Within these branches of art are institutionalized canons which attempt to place the 'works' into finite hierarchies differentiating greater and lesser value. Of course these hierarchies are not fixed. In contradiction to the sense of the universal which is supposed to characterize 'great art', new works (by no means always newly created) are admitted over time, just as established ones slip down or out. But at all times there are a limited number only of 'great works'.

These different aspects of the institutionalization of art produce the physical organizational and cultural separation of 'art', but also the possibility of an *internal* 'hyperinstitutionalization' of 'art' – the complete dissociation of art from living contexts. This is

where the merely formal features of art can become the guarantee of its 'aesthetic', rather than its relevance and relation to real-life processes and concerns: religious art installed in the antiseptic stillness of the museum. In the 'hyperinstitutionalization' of 'art', aesthetic appreciation can become so atrophied as to make culturedness only the knowledge of form. Expressions and artefacts become inert things. Seated in the opera stalls, knowing what to expect again, seeing themselves reflected all around, the élite may actually be bored through and through with only the shell of that which used to contain a passion of meaning.

When aesthetic communication and critique become rhetorical assemblies of clever allusions and of wholly self-contained and therefore usually vacuous artistic 'cross references', 'art' can end up in a floating and sometimes charlatan aesthetic without its own associated human practices and transformations. But this floating aesthetic conceals the social process by which it is appreciated, a process relying largely on the prior institutions of liberal-arts education to supply the knowledge of the purely formal and internal history of 'art'. And here lies the rub, for in the hyperinstitutionalization of 'art' the 'others', the 'uncultured', merely lack the code, but they're seen and may sometimes see themselves as ignorant, insensitive and without the finer sensibilities of those who really 'appreciate'. Absolutely certainly they're not the 'talented' or 'gifted', the élite minority held to be capable of performing or creating 'art'.

The traditional function of the artist is seen to be in the production of a refined aesthetic in things, texts and artefacts. Cultural practices involve, to be sure, symbolic representations, and part of their creativity is in the critical and creative transformation of these representations. But representational work cannot claim the distinction of being involved in a creative aesthetic unless it is in some real productive relationship to what is represented, unless it is embedded in a process of consciousness and meaning-making – categories which are not 'internally coded' but are a result of symbolic creativity. The notion of the full-time artist – separate from the market and requiring subsidy – is, if anything, at the periphery of the field of symbolic creativity in common culture, not at its centre. But it can seem to be its centre, thus disorienting the whole field with respect to its own real cultural practices and functions. Furthermore it may be that certain kinds of symbolic creativity in the expressive and communicative activity of 'disadvantaged' groups exercise their uses and economies in precisely eluding and evading formal recognition, publicity and the possible control by others of their own visceral meanings. In this case the

decontextualized search for aesthetics is, by definition, doomed to endless labour, for the aesthetic will be wherever it isn't. Hyper-institutionalization excludes but can also repel.

It seemed for a time that things might be different. In the phase of social reconstruction after the war, part of the welfare-capitalist pact was to widen out the appreciation and practice of the high arts from their traditional base in the leisured upper-middle class. The arts were part of those good things of life which were to be shared out more equally. As in other areas, the state was to be responsible for this sharing out. The formation of the Arts Council in 1945 and the BBC Third Programme in 1946 was to spearhead this democratization of the arts. But the 'raise and spread' motto didn't last very long or spread very far. The Arts Council withdrew very promptly from the sites of popular consumption, cutting back promotions in Butlin's holiday camps, exhibitions in schools, canteens, factories and shops. Local arts clubs, regional initiatives, subsidized symphonies – many of these too were soon abandoned.

In fact the state became the vehicle for the continuance and reinforcement of the traditional conceptions and institutions of high culture rather than a vehicle for cultural democratization and experimentation with new, altogether wider institutions. The 'spreading' of art became highly specific and essentially conservative: the leisure-class idea of 'good culture' maintained its dominance (if not the class itself) but with now a wider well-subsidized audience of the rising middle class of managers and professionals.

The current attempts by the Conservative government to abrogate the 1945 welfare pact, specifically in the cultural field, by forcing the arts to reconstitute themselves in market terms does not really attack the continuing minority basis, elite and exclusive definition of the high arts. It merely seeks to lessen or to remove their state subsidies – or even bring back patronage in the form of high-class corporate-image enhancement. If the post-1945 welfare-state arts policy had really been about democratic cultural development, if it had not given up so early on imaginative alternatives, if it had not so easily taken over the leisure-class view of art, then the current opposition to the government's cultural pre-Keynesianism might, itself, be much more broadly based.

Though subordinated and often marginalized, the many strands of the community arts movement continue to carry the torch. They share the continuing concern to democratize the arts and make them more a part of common experience. Their search for new or expanded publics can, however, suffer from the implicit assumption that such groups are, in some sense, 'non-publics', that they have no forms of their own, no culture, no common culture, except

perhaps a very much debased version of elite culture or of mass culture passively consumed. There can be a final unwillingness and limit even in subversive or alternative movements towards an arts democracy. They may have escaped the physical institutions and academies, but not always their conventions – the forms must be kept more or less intact. If they must go, then so too does any notion of a specifically artistic practice. What is left is indistinguishable from other activities such as community action or politics itself. Some activists are, indeed, led by this logic to pure community action. But an approach which won't discard the conventions makes assumptions which presuppose effects which must be free. If it is to be free, creative activity must be allowed to be what it is, and to lead where it will.

There seem to be hidden questions behind even those arts initiatives and policies which genuinely seek cultural democratization – not 'What are their cultures?' but 'Why are their cultures not like ours?', 'Why are their cultures not as we think they should be?'

Our starting points

Though we deal with symbolic activity and creativity in this book, we have not, therefore, found it useful to start from and write within an 'arts' perspective. The original interest at Gulbenkian (see Preface) was precisely in approaching someone from 'outside', from outside the institutions, from outside the arts world, to cast a fresh eye on the 'artistic' activities of young people. In this book we've revelled in writing from a profane, robust and independent position about issues which have become so refined and rarefied in their own temples and shrines that they sometimes cannot be identified or spoken of at all. Often they cannot be handled at all, never mind usefully or for useful purposes. But nor are we, by intention at least, anti-art or philistine in our outlook. It is simply that, in trying to argue for and present the centrality of forms of symbolic creativity in everyday 'ordinary' culture, we don't want to start from where 'art' thinks is 'here', from within its perspectives, definitions and institutions. The search for new or expanded publics has started from the wrong end of the social process – from objects and artefacts, not people.

Our 'independence', however, does not consist in simply inverting elitism. We do not pursue a cultural populism grading 'art equivalents' in popular texts – an exercise which leaves many of the definitions and forms intact whilst simply replacing the object of scrutiny, still concentrating on 'things' and finding ever more

bright and clever and allusive ways of celebrating or criticizing them. Most popular cultural approaches to the 'lived' merely extend this language, this 'discourse', out from texts in a gloss and appearance of social connectedness without adding anything real to our knowledge of how symbols and forms are actually used in living cultures. In this sense popular cultural criticism and armchair semiotics have become secondhand vehicles – even when they go like Rolls-Royces – for understanding the lived. Viewing life through the glass of symbolic panels. Slumming in safety! The point for us is to try to understand the dynamic, precarious, virtual uses of symbols in common culture, not understanding the everyday through popular representation but understanding popular representation through and in the everyday. The fundamental project is to present and understand the creative symbolic elements of ordinary life, an important part of which is certainly the role and uses of popular representations, but understood through their use in – not reflection of – the everyday. The distinctiveness of this book is, then, that by ambition at least, when focusing on recognized popular cultural forms – music, fashion, the cultural media – we do so from the point of view of their use and meaning for and by young people. Our penultimate chapter focuses on everyday situations themselves, rather than on specific textual and cultural uses, and tries to show the symbolic creativity there. That is the 'centre of gravity' from which the whole book should be weighed and read, even when we are dealing with 'internal' textual or formal questions.

If you like, this is a more sociological or anthropological rather than artistic or cultural (in the sense of 'culture' as produced by or seen through texts and artefacts) starting-point, a starting-point not in clever responses to things, but in stupid responses to people. These responses are necessarily raw, open and faulted – 'stupid' – because the job is so messy and hard to do, which is why, of course, it is so rarely attempted and the 'cultural experts' stop in their chairs. Nevertheless our shared terrain with an arts or culture approach is in our central interest in symbolic creativity – though for us a sensuous and dynamic process rather than a formal feature of artistic 'things'. We argue for symbolic creativity as an integral ('ordinary') part of the human condition, not as the inanimate peaks (popular or remote) rising above its mists.

Our interest connects to a concern with a properly adequate theory of social action, of the formation and reproduction of collective and individual identities, as much as it connects to artistic or cultural concerns. To repeat, this is not to exclude 'art' from daily life, or to seek to add further social or theoretical barriers to its

wider 'appreciation'. Indeed we hope to help build an altogether more satisfactory basis for thinking about the ordinary involvements of all symbolic creativity which entirely transcend tired 'appreciation' and which may lead to many innovations and new or renewed 'artistic beginnings'.

All arts, dead or living, in or out of their times, can live and do live in our scheme, but they have to earn their keep. We don't wish to be in at the end of 'art' but to direct attention back to, if you like, the wellsprings of art. Our project is to establish, or re-establish, some essential, critical, uncluttered and old-fashioned truths. Creative activity, reflection and expression are in all young people's lives all of the time – only they have different names. We aim to spell out some of them.

The basic method we've used to get inside the words and to spell them out has been a loose and general form of ethnography utilizing, in particular, the recorded group discussion. We provide statistical profiles, histories and descriptive contexts where appropriate, but our main aim is to allow young people's words and experiences to come through directly into the written text. Our ethnographic research and presentation have not aspired to a full methodological rigour, and we've ranged widely, sometimes at the cost of depth, for examples of symbolic creativity without really providing accounts of whole ways of life. But we have presented cultural items through the contexts of young people's own practices, meanings and usages of them, as gathered through our direct fieldwork methods. Discussions were taped with a variety of different groups of young people in Wolverhampton (see beginning of chapter 5 for details). These provided evidence and data which we've drawn on throughout the book; where not otherwise indicated quoted material comes usually from this source. The book also draws on a range of ethnographic fieldwork materials written up for the original Gulbenkian project (see Preface) and conducted in a variety of places including Sunderland, Leicester, South Birmingham, London and Kidderminster.

We've focused on young people, not because they are 'different', locked into some biological stage that enforces its own social condition, but simply because they provide the best and most crucial examples of our argument. The teenage and early adult years are important from a cultural perspective and in special need of a close 'qualitative' attention because it is here, at least in the first-world western cultures, where people are formed most self-consciously through their own symbolic and other activities. It is where they form symbolic moulds through which they understand themselves and their possibilities for the rest of their lives. It is also

the stage where people begin to construct themselves through nuance and complexity, through difference as well as similarity.

Our main ethnographic materials are drawn from working-class experience. We have not systematically explored class differences. However, we would claim that many of the processes which we discuss hold true as tendencies in middle-class experience too, though in different and more contradictory relation to and producing different effects from school, work, the family and inherited 'cultural capital', and are major cross-class cultural levelling forces.

There are, therefore, many commonalities in youth experience and it is these we try to highlight. It is clear, however, that symbolic work and creativity can also differ in form, style and content according to age and 'life style' (living with parents or not, whether or not married, with or without children). We have not attempted to delineate this.

We have decided not to try to present a separate cultural picture of ethnic-minority youth. It is beyond our scope to do this in a properly responsible way and our focus is in any case not to provide authoritative accounts of whole cultures but to highlight the symbolic work and creativity of young people, wherever we find them. We draw many such examples from ethnic-minority experience.

Some general points, however, should be made. It is clear from our fieldwork that Caribbean and Asian traditions are very important to young black people. They use their cultural backgrounds as frameworks for living and as repertoires of symbolic resources for interpreting all aspects of their lives. This is a source of much pride to most of them and one of the fundamental means through which they explore what distinguishes them from white youth. This is necessary, not only for the development of their own identities, but also necessary as an affirmation and assertion against an omnipresent racism which tells young blacks that being 'English' means being white as well as native born, and that those who are not white can never completely fit into British culture.

But young black people can never look wholly to the prior generation for clues about how to develop their own identities. The experiences of the two generations differ, and some cultural commonalities with white youth must arise from their shared conditions of life – common experiences in the same streets and schools mediated by many of the same cultural media. Often young black people are engaged in a doubly creative task. They are trying to negotiate what it means to be a black person in a white culture at the same time as they are engaged in the same creative activities as their white peers, through which they also explore aspects of their black identities. The balance which young people strike between

these things differs from culture to culture and from individual to individual.

Necessary work and symbolic creativity

Our project is to uncover, explore and present symbolic creativity in everyday life. Apart from merely asserting its importance and, we hope, demonstrating its existence, why do we insist on the visceral connection of symbolic creativity to the everyday? At bottom, what anchors it?

We argue that symbolic creativity is not only part of everyday human activity, but also a necessary part. This is because it is an integral part of *necessary work* – that which has to be done every day, that which is not extra but essential to ensure the daily production and reproduction of human existence. It is this which actually guarantees and locks in the relevance of symbolic creativity. It is this which underlies claims that the real roots of art lie in the everyday. But of what kind of necessary work do we speak? What is the basis for including symbolic creativity in it?

Necessary work is taken usually to designate the application of human capacities through the action of tools on raw materials to produce goods and services, usually through wage labour, to satisfy physical human needs. Certainly the role of symbolic creativity in this should not be underestimated. The English radical tradition² has stressed the dignity of labour and has sought in different ways to unify a certain view of living art with skill in work. William Morris, of course, proposed the famous general equation $\text{art} = \text{work}/\text{pleasure}$. Working and writing in the 1920s and 30s of this century Eric Gill³ is perhaps the clearest, most trenchant and most recent exponent of this tradition.

For him art was the principle of skill in the making of useful things well. For him work was holy. The daily reproduction of our lives was holy. It was the play of symbolic creativity in these things which made them holy.

Unfortunately, it was evident in Gill's time, now overwhelming, that, despite the continuing human need for creativity in useful activity, modern industry has all but destroyed the possibility of 'art' in paid work. Machine production took the craft tool out of the craft hand. This more or less destroyed the possibilities of creativity at work. Automatic production takes hand, tool and body altogether out of the workplace! It is simply an idealism now to speak of 'holy' work. Nor will anyone pay the price of 'holy poverty' necessary to reintroduce 'holy work'.

But there is another kind of humanly necessary work – often

unrecognized but equally necessary – *symbolic work*. This is the application of human capacities to and through, on and with symbolic resources and raw materials (collections of signs and symbols – for instance, the language as we inherit it as well as texts, songs, films, images and artefacts of all kinds) to produce meanings. This is broader than, logically prior to and a condition of material production, but its ‘necessariness’ has been forgotten.

Necessary symbolic work is necessary simply because humans are communicating as well as producing beings. Perhaps they are communicative before they are productive. Whilst all may not be productive, all are communicative. *All*. This is our species distinction. Nor is this a merely formal or physiological property that might lie unused in some. Only through its exercise does communication exist and all of us communicate. This is how we manifest and produce the social and dynamic nature of our humanity.

We argue that necessary symbolic work is spread across the whole of life. It is a condition of it, and of our daily humanity. Those who stress the separateness, the sublime and quintessential in ‘art’ have actually assumed and encouraged a mindlessly vulgar, materialist view of everyday life. They counterpose this to their view of ‘the imaginative’. They thereby view daily life as a cultural desert. The imagined symbolic deficit of everyday life is then, in its turn, to be repaired by recourse to a free-floating ‘imaginative realm’, to ‘useless things’, to ‘art for art’s sake’, to the ‘socially redundant’. But this is not only circular, it’s incoherent. It’s like trying to make time go faster by speeding up clocks. ‘Art’ is taken as the *only* field of qualitative symbolic activity, the one-per-cent transcendental value that preserves humanity. As daily life is drained of its symbolic work, ‘art’ is grotesquely bloated till its pores leak pure imagination. And only from ‘art’ can come a cultural mission into the humdrum, a doomed attempt to save the masses. Again ‘art’ produces culture. Symbolic work starts, not ends, in separate artefacts. The imaginative is self-validating!

We insist, against this, that imagination is not extra to daily life, something to be supplied from disembodied ‘art’. It is part of the necessariness of everyday symbolic and communicative work. If declared redundant here, it will certainly not be welcomed back in the finer robes of ‘art’.

This point cannot be overstated: where we can’t now realistically acknowledge and promote the prospect of symbolic creativity in the sinews of necessary work as material production, we can and must recognize symbolic creativity in the sinews of necessary work as symbolic production.

What are some of the basic elements of necessary symbolic work?

First, language as a practice and symbolic resource. Language is the primary instrument that we use to communicate. It is the highest ordering of our sensuous impressions of the world, and the ultimate basis of our hope and capacity to control it. It enables interaction and solidarity with others and allows us to assess our impact on others and theirs on us. It therefore allows us to see ourselves as others.

Second, the active body as a practice and symbolic resource. The body is a site of somatic knowledge as well as a set of signs and symbols. It is the source of productive and communicative activity – signing, symbolizing, feeling.

Third, drama as a practice and symbolic resource. Communicative interaction with others is not automatic. We do not communicate from head to head through wires drilled into our skulls. Communication is achieved through roles, rituals and performances that we produce with others. Dramaturgical components of the symbolic include a variety of non-verbal communications, as well as sensuous cultural practices and communal solidarities. These include dancing, singing, joke-making, story-telling in dynamic settings and through performance.

Fourth and most importantly, symbolic creativity. Language, the body, dramatic forms are, in a way, both raw material and tools. Symbolic creativity is more fully the practice, the making – or their essence, what all practices have in common, what drives them. This is the production of *new* (however small the shift) meanings intrinsically attached to feeling, to energy, to excitement and psychic movement. This is the basis of confidence in dynamic human capacities as realities rather than as potentials – to be made conscious, through some concrete practice or active mediation, of the quality of human consciousness and how it can further be developed through the exercise and application of vital powers. Symbolic creativity can be seen as roughly equivalent to what an all-embracing and inclusive notion of the living arts might include (counterposed, of course, to the current exclusions of ‘art’.) Symbolic creativity may be individual and/or collective. It transforms what is provided and helps to produce specific forms of human identity and capacity. Being human – human be-ing-ness – means to be creative in the sense of remaking the world for ourselves as we make and find our own place and identity.

What exactly is produced by symbolic work and symbolic creativity?

First, and perhaps most important, they produce and reproduce individual identities – who and what ‘I am’ and could become.

These may be diffuse, contradictory or decentred but they are produced through symbolic work including struggles to make meaning. Sensuous human communicative activities are also intersubjective. It is through knowing 'the other', including recognizing the self as an other for some others, that a self or selves can be known at all.

Second, symbolic work and creativity place identities in larger wholes. Identities do not stand alone above history, beyond history. They are related in time, place and things. It is symbolic work and creativity which realize the structured collectivity of individuals as well as their differences, which realize the materiality of context as well as the symbolism of self. This reminds us that locations and situations are not only *determinations* – they're also relations and resources to be discovered, explored and experienced. Memberships of race, class, gender, age and region are not only learned, they're lived and experimented with. This is so even if only by pushing up against the oppressive limits of established order and power.

Third and finally, symbolic work and especially creativity develop and affirm our active senses of our own vital capacities, the powers of the self and how they might be applied to the cultural world. This is what makes activity and identity *transitive* and specifically human. It is the dynamic and, therefore, clinching part of identity. It is the expectation of being able to apply power to the world to change it – however minutely. It is how, in the future, there is some human confidence that unities may be formed out of confusion, patterns out of irregularity. This is to be able to make judgements on who's a friend, who's an enemy, when to talk, when to hold silence, when to go, when to stop. But it's also associated with, and helps to form, overall styles of thinking which promise to make most sense of the world for you. It's also a cultural sense of what symbolic forms – languages, images, musics, haircuts, styles, clothes – 'work' most economically and creatively for the self. A culturally learned sense of the powers of the self is what makes the self in connecting it to others and to the world.

In many ways this is directly a question of cultural survival for many young people. Processes of symbolic work and symbolic creativity are very open, contested and unstable under conditions of late modernization. All young people experience one aspect or another of the contemporary 'social condition' of youth: unwilling economic dependence on parents and parental homes; uncertainty regarding future planning; powerlessness and lack of control over immediate circumstances of life; feelings of symbolic as well as material marginality to the main society; imposed institutional and ideological constructions of 'youth' which privilege certain

readings and definitions of what young people should do, feel or be.⁴

Many of the traditional resources of, and inherited bases for, social meaning, membership, security and psychic certainty have lost their legitimacy for a good proportion of young people. There is no longer a sense of a 'whole culture' with allocated places and a shared, universal value system. Organized religion, the monarchy, trade unions, schools, public broadcasting, high culture and its intertwinings with public culture no longer supply ready values and models of duty and meaning to help structure the passage into settled adulthood. This is certainly partly a result of much commented-upon wider processes related to late modernization: secularization; consumerism; individualization; decollectivization; weakening respect for authority; new technologies of production and distribution. But it is also the case that these inherited traditions owe their still continuing and considerable power to the stakes they offer and seem to offer to the individual: some graspable identity within a set of relationships to other identities; some notion of citizenship within a larger whole which offers rights, satisfactions and loyalties as well as duty and submission. However, for many young people, made to feel marginal to this society, and without their own material stake in it, these merely symbolic stakes can seem very remote. These public traditions and meanings cannot make good what they offer, because they are undercut at another more basic level by unfulfilled expectations. These things are for parents and adults, for those who have an interest in and make up the civil body. For the young black British they're even more remote – they are for other people's parents. No longer can we be blind to the 'whiteness' of our major traditional public sources of identity.

Young working-class women may experience this youth condition in a special way. On the one hand they are a target consumption group for many home commodities as well as for feminine-style-and-identity products. On the other hand, and with no money recompense and no real power in the consumer market, they may be making partial, early and exploited 'transitions' (often in an imperceptible extension of childhood domestic chores 'naturally' expected of girls but not of boys) into domestic roles of care and maintenance. This may seem to be a destination of sorts and a meaningful, useful activity when labour-market opportunities are scarce or difficult, but it can often be a specific unofficial training and subjective preparation for a lifetime's future of domestic drudgery coupled with job 'opportunities' only in part-time, low-paid, insecure, usually dead-end 'female' service work.

In general the arrival of a new and extended youth stage announces itself through the arrival of new institutional forms, and the adaption of old ones, aimed at its regulation. The Youth Training Scheme, Employment Training, recent developments in youth work practice and drop-in centres for the unemployed, 'civil disorder' and community policing, changes in benefit rules for the under-25s, are all aimed in some way at controlling and filling the time of youth or at maintaining some promise (and discipline) for future transitions or at preventing and pre-empting alternative uses of time and capacity not devoted to preparation for future transitions.

There is a set of meanings and identities on offer here, highly restricted, applied and focused. They are unlikely to replace the collapsing traditional ones. Indeed the tasks of symbolic work and creativity may include not only the attempt to retain identity in the face of the erosion of traditional value systems but also to forge new resistant, resilient and independent ones to survive in and find alternatives to the impoverished roles proffered by modern state bureaucracies and rationalized industry.

Work and play

We've argued that necessary symbolic work and symbolic creativity are spread through the whole of life, through work and play. Increasingly, however, it is play that matters to this work. The informal realm of 'leisure'⁵ is of vital and increasing importance for the operation of symbolic work as identity-making. There is simply decreasing room for creativity in the necessary symbolic work of most paid work,⁶ so its impetus is thrown increasingly on to, or develops more in, leisure activities. A well-known sociological study of the late 1970s found that 87 per cent of a 1,000-strong sample of non-apprenticed male manual workers in Peterborough exercised more skill in driving to work than they did in work.⁷ Occupational therapists seeking better opportunities for the educationally sub-normal tell us that most manual work needs only a mental age of 12 or less.⁸ Perhaps that is why so many young people of more normal mental age move on restlessly, job hopping for better chances; 40 per cent of 16–24-year-olds leave their jobs every year (*General Household Survey*, 1987).

Of course, there is a whole debate concerning the changing nature of modern work with some arguing that new technology has created new and exciting opportunities for many young people. There appears to be a dominant consensus emerging,⁹ however, that the workforce generally is shaping into a core/periphery pat-

tern with a relatively large minority (the core) enjoying high pay and good security with the majority (the periphery) suffering from low pay, insecurity and high job turnover. Women, black workers and young workers constitute the main supply of peripheral labour.

Whatever the detailed arguments, the fundamental point is that most of the jobs which young people occupy simply cannot offer the intrinsic satisfaction of skill in the making of useful things well to which Eric Gill refers. There is usually no control over the task or over the use of tools and materials necessary to complete it. There is certainly no sense of the completeness of the whole work process commencing, crucially, with the human imagination of, and plans for, a desired outcome followed by the organization and use of all necessary human capacities to achieve it. The scope for symbolic work and creativity is greatly attenuated, if not destroyed. The cry for a better 'qualified' and 'skilled' workforce may well be 'new-speak', actually, for a demand for better reliability and job discipline amongst young workers in the face of likely (rational) responses to the mounting intrinsic meaninglessness of much modern work.

Necessary symbolic work is often now exercised not so much *through* labour, as *on* it and *about* it – using vital powers to make sense of it, comprehend its human deficits and injuries, to make and find informal alternatives and compensations.¹⁰

Whilst society dehumanizes work, it sentimentalizes 'Art'. So the 'arts' ignore work but are quick to condemn its 'reliefs'. But the reality is that many, if not most, young people feel more themselves in leisure than they do at work. Though only 'fun' and apparently inconsequential, it's actually where their creative symbolic abilities are most at play. Necessary symbolic work can operate under conditions of much greater freedom and self-energization in leisure than at work. Crucially it is the realm of the informal – specifically in the sense of freedom of symbolic activity and choice – rather than the formal. In many ways 'leisure' is now a wholly inadequate term to encompass these meanings. It simply cannot contain or invoke the sense of the massive symbolic investment now placed in free time and the ways in which it is used to explore transitional stages in growing older and to make and internalize new identities.

Informal relations certainly exist in work as a whole subterranean network and with their own 'unofficial' meanings. But the indirect and sometimes direct logic of capitalist production, especially in the 'new competitive climate', is to press in on and try to eliminate them. Meanwhile, in an unconscious and conscious bid for cultural survival on their own terms, young people seem to turn deliberately to the informal and to resist administered symbols. It is

in informal relations and informal 'free' time where they find a greater possibility of authentic and direct communication in trusting contexts. In the world of work, the managerial and public world of formal relations, people are treated like objects. Informally, it seems, people can be treated like humans, as free and equal expressive subjects. At work, sincerity, truthfulness, openness are weaknesses – things to be exploited – whereas in informal leisure these are things which seem to be valued.

In a way the spectacular sub-cultures of the 1950s and 60s prefigured some of the general shifts we are claiming for the contemporary situation. They defined themselves very early and gained their very spectacle from seeking visible identities and styles outside or against work and working respectabilities. Now the idea of a spectacular sub-culture is strictly impossible because all style and taste cultures, to some degree or another, express something of a general trend to find and make identity outside the realm of work.¹¹

One way of understanding the possibilities we are arguing for in leisure is to adapt William Morris' famous equation, art = work/pleasure, by moving the terms around to produce the different formula, pleasure = art/work.¹² The realm of leisure/pleasure is not inconsequential, or 'necessary' only for the re-creation of the capacity to work in waged labour. It contains its own work, its own 'art-work', symbolic work which is about the formation and expression of identity – this work in play is more crucial in many ways than the material productions of formal worktime.

Eric Gill opens his essay 'Of slavery and freedom' with:

That state is a state of Slavery in which a man does what he likes to do in his spare time and in his working time that which is required of him. . . . That state is a state of Freedom in which a man does what he likes to do in his working time and in his spare time that which is required of him.¹³

He would, of course, have flatly rejected this notion, but it could be proposed that elements of his formulations with regard to 'leisure' have indeed come to pass. There is now a necessity in leisure, the necessary symbolic work of modern cultural survival, of developing identity and connecting its powers actively to the cultural world.

The informal and leisure agenda is much bigger now, the field for realizable emancipation much wider. The possibilities for symbolic creativity have been greatly, if contradictorily expanded. Expectations and hopes have broken free from the old suppressions to demand human significance, satisfaction, expression and develop-

ment *now*. In many ways most people's lives are just being awakened after being deadened at work, boxed in, bored or worn out at home. Young people are in the vanguard of seeking pleasure, fun, autonomy and self-direction – and this quest is increasingly focused in and on leisure, in and on the hidden continent of the informal. They seek possibilities there, in their own way, which have formerly been open only in the more glamorous public worlds of artists, writers and the truly 'leisured' classes.

This is not to say that the old collective social categories have broken down under the weight of individualism and an emphasis on informal life – certainly not in an objective way. Social and cultural activities continue to be patterned and limited by class, gender and race. Often new collectivities and solidarities illuminate or are continuous with some of the aspects of the old ones. It's more that people in all groups and classes, but especially now the 'less privileged', want more and more their own 'bit of the action'. They want significance and satisfaction *now* necessarily partly as individuals and not as part of the army of other people's power. The subversion and destruction – verbally, stylistically, expressively – of stereotypical views of homogeneous class cultures is to be welcomed. For the working class this is a victory. Certain freedoms, and especially cultural ones, are felt and produce change individually. This does not signify the end of classes and groups. It is in and from these positions and mutualities, and in different ways, that individuality grows and returns to in surprising ways.

Commodities and consumerism

The main cultural materials and resources used in the symbolic work of leisure are cultural commodities. They are supplied to the market overwhelmingly by the commercial cultural industries and media for profit. Indeed it was the market discovery, exploitation and development in the 1950s and 60s of a newly defined affluent and expanding consumer group of young people which produced the popular conception of 'the teenager'.¹⁴ We're currently experiencing a renewed and it seems even less caring emphasis on market forces in cultural matters. The rise of leisure we've referred to is really the rise of commercialized leisure. Does this matter? Does their production in a commercial nexus devalue cultural commodities and the contents of the cultural media?

There is a strange unanimity – and ghostly embrace of their opposites – between left and right when it comes to a condemnation of consumerism and especially of the penetration of the market into cultural matters. It is the profane in the Temple for the

artistic establishment. For some left cultural analysts it constitutes a widened field of exploitation which is in and for itself unwelcome; now workers are exploited in their leisure as well as in their work. The circuit of domination is complete with no escape from market relations.

We disagree with both assessments, especially with their shared underlying pessimism. They both ignore the dynamic and living qualities of everyday culture and especially their necessary work and symbolic creativity. These things have always been in existence, though usually ignored or marginalized. They continue to be ignored even when an extraordinary development and transformation of them are in progress. For symbolic work and creativity mediate, and are simultaneously expanded and developed *by*, the uses, meanings and 'effects' of cultural commodities. Cultural commodities are catalyst, not product; a stage in, not the destination of, cultural affairs. Consumerism now has to be understood as an active, not a passive, process. Its play includes work.

If it ever existed at all, the old 'mass' has been culturally emancipated into popularly differentiated cultural citizens through exposure to a widened circle of commodity relations. These things have supplied a much widened range of usable symbolic resources for the development and emancipation of everyday culture. Certainly this emancipation has been partial and contradictory because the consumer industries have sought to provide some of the contents and certainly the forms as well as the possibilities for cultural activity. Consumerism continuously reproduces an image of, and therefore helps to encourage, selfishness and narcissism in individualized consumption and hedonism. But those tendencies are now given features of our cultural existence. It is the so far undervalued balance of development and emancipation which has to be grasped. As we shall see, the images and offers of consumerism are not always taken at face value, nor are 'individualized' forms of consciousness as socially isolated and self-regarding as the pessimists suppose. Meanwhile a whole continent of informal, everyday culture has been recognized, opened up and developed.

Capitalism and its images speak directly to desire for its own profit. But in that very process it breaks down or short-circuits limiting customs and taboos. It will do anything and supply any profane material in order to keep the cash tills ringing. But, in this, commerce discovered, *by exploiting*, the realm of necessary symbolic production within the undiscovered continent of the informal. No other agency has recognized this realm or supplied it with usable symbolic materials. And commercial entrepreneurship of the cultural field has discovered something real. For whatever

self-serving reasons it was accomplished, we believe that this is an historical *recognition*. It counts and is irreversible. Commercial cultural forms have helped to produce an historical present from which we cannot now escape and in which there are many more materials – no matter what we think of them – available for necessary symbolic work than ever there were in the past.¹⁵ Out of these come forms not dreamt of in the commercial imagination and certainly not in the official one – forms which make up common culture.

The hitherto hidden continent of the informal (including resources and practices drawn from traditional folk and working-class culture) produces, therefore, from cultural commodities much expounded, unprefigured and exciting effects – and this is why, of course, commerce keeps returning to the streets and common culture to find its next commodities. There is a fundamental and unstable contradictoriness in commercial rationality and instrumentality when it comes to consumer cultural goods. Blanket condemnations of market capitalism will never find room for it or understand it.

For our argument perhaps the basic complexity to be unravelled is this. Whereas it may be said that work relations and the drive for efficiency now hinge upon *the suppression* of informal symbolic work in most workers, the logic of the cultural and leisure industries hinges on the opposite tendency: a form of *their enablement and release*. Whereas the ideal model for the worker is the good time kept, the disciplined and empty head, the model for the good consumer is the converse – a head full of unbounded appetites for symbolic things.

Oddly and ironically, it is from capitalism's own order of priorities, roles, rules and instrumentalities *in production* (ironically, of leisure goods and services too) that informal cultures seek escape and alternatives in capitalist leisure *consumption*. Commerce appears twice in the cultural argument, as that which is to be escaped from and that which provides the means and materials for alternatives. Modern capitalism is now not only parasitic upon the puritan ethic, but also upon its instability and even its subversion.

There is a widespread view that these means and materials, the cultural media and cultural commodities, must appeal to the lowest common denominators of taste. Not only do they have no intrinsic value but, more disturbingly, they may have coded-in negative values which manipulate, cheapen, degrade and even brutalize the sensibilities of 'the masses'.

In contradiction we argue that there is no such thing as an autonomous artefact capable of printing its own intrinsic values,

one way, on human sensibility. This is to put a ludicrous (actually crude Marxist) emphasis on *production* and what is held to be initially coded into artefacts.

What has been forgotten is that circumstances change cases, contexts change texts. The received view of aesthetics suggests that the aesthetic effect is internal to the text, and a universal property of its form. This places the creative impulse squarely on the material productions of the 'creative' artist, with the reception or consumption of art wholly determined by its aesthetic form, palely reflecting what is timelessly coded within the text. Against this we want to rehabilitate consumption, creative consumption, to see creative potentials in it for itself, rather than see it as the dying fall of the usual triplet: production, reproduction, reception. We are interested to explore how far 'meanings' and 'effects' can change quite decisively according to the social contexts of 'consumption', to different kinds of 'de-coding' and worked on by different forms of symbolic work and creativity. We want to explore how far *grounded* aesthetics are part, not of things, but of processes involving consumption, processes which make consumption pleasurable and vital. Viewers, listeners and readers do their own symbolic work on a text and create their own relationships to technical means of reproduction and transfer. There is a kind of cultural production all within consumption.

Young TV viewers, for instance, have become highly critical and literate in visual forms, plot conventions and cutting techniques. They listen, often highly selectively, to pop music now within a whole shared history of pop styles and genres. These knowledges clearly mediate the meanings of texts. The fact that many texts may be classified as intrinsically banal, contrived and formalistic must be put against the possibility that their living reception is the opposite of these things.

The 'productive' reception of and work on texts and artefacts can also be the start of a social process which results in its own more concrete productions, either of new forms or of recombined existing ones. Perhaps we should see the 'raw materials' of cultural life, of communications and expressions, as always intermediate. They are the products of one process as well as the raw materials for another, whose results can be, in turn, raw materials for successive groups. Why shouldn't bedroom decoration and personal styles, combinations of others' 'productions', be viewed along with creative writing or song and music composition as fields of aesthetic realization? Furthermore the grounded appropriation of new technology and new hardware may open new possibilities for expression, or recombinations of old ones, which the dominant

culture misses because it does not share the same conditions and contradictory pressures of that which is to be explained or come to terms with.

Our basic point is that human consumption does not simply repeat the relations of production – and whatever cynical motives lie behind them. Interpretation, symbolic action and creativity are *part* of consumption. They're involved in the whole realm of necessary symbolic work. This work is at least as important as whatever might originally be encoded in commodities and can often produce their opposites. Indeed some aspects of 'profanity' in commercial artefacts may be liberating and progressive, introducing the possibility of the new and the socially dynamic.

It is pointless and limiting to judge artefacts *alone*, outside their social relations of consumption, with only the tutored critic's opinion of an internal aesthetic allowed to count. This is what limits the 'Official Arts' in their institutions. People bring living identities to commerce and the consumption of cultural commodities as well as being formed there. They bring experiences, feelings, social position and social memberships to their encounter with commerce. Hence they bring a necessary creative symbolic pressure, not only to make sense of cultural commodities, but partly through them also to make sense of contradiction and structure as they experience them in school, college, production, neighbourhood, and as members of certain genders, races, classes and ages. The results of this necessary symbolic work may be quite different from anything initially coded into cultural commodities.

Grounded aesthetics

As we have used the term so far, 'symbolic creativity' is an abstract concept designating a human capacity almost in general. It only exists, however, in contexts and, in particular, sensuous living processes. To identify the particular dynamic of symbolic activity and transformation in concrete named situations we propose the term 'grounded aesthetic'. This is the creative element in a process whereby meanings are attributed to symbols and practices and where symbols and practices are selected, reselected, highlighted and recomposed to resonate further appropriated and particularized meanings. Such dynamics are emotional as well as cognitive. There are as many aesthetics as there are grounds for them to operate in. Grounded aesthetics are the yeast of common culture.

We have deliberately used the term 'aesthetic' to show both the differences and the continuities of what we are trying to say with respect to the culture and arts debate. We are certainly concerned

with what might be called principles of beauty, but as qualities of living symbolic activities rather than as qualities of things; as ordinary aspects of common culture, rather than as extraordinary aspects of uncommon culture. This is the sense of our clumsy but strictly accurate use of 'grounded'.

Our 'groundedness' for some will seem simply no more than the reckless destruction of flight, potting birds of paradise with sociological lead. For others the strange search for archaic aesthetics in grounded, everyday social relations will seem perverse, un-material and even mystical. We're happy to work on the assumption that 'the truth' lies somewhere, always provisionally, in between, that human be-ing-ness needs both air and earth and, in turn, makes possible our very idea of both.

Within the process of creating meanings from and within the use of symbols there may be a privileged role for texts and artefacts, but a grounded aesthetic can also be an element and a quality of everyday social relations. For instance, there is a dramaturgy and poetics of everyday life, of social presence, encounter and event. It may have become invisible in the routinized roles of adult life, but the young have much more time and they face each other with fewer or more fragile masks. They are the practical existentialists. They sometimes have no choice but to be, often too, absorbed in the moment and to ransack immediate experience for grounded aesthetics. For them some features of social life may not be about the regulation and containment of tension, but about its creation and increase. The 'aimless' life of groups and gangs may be about producing something from nothing, from 'doing nothing'. It may be about building tensions, shaping grounded aesthetics, orchestrating and shaping their release and further build-ups, so that a final 'catharsis' takes with it or changes other tensions and stresses inherent in the difficulties of their condition. Making a pattern in an induced swirl of events can produce strangely still centres of heightened awareness where time is held and unusual control and insight are possible. Grounded aesthetics are what lift and mark such moments.

Grounded aesthetics are the specifically creative and dynamic moments of a whole process of cultural life, of cultural birth and rebirth. To know the cultural world, our relationship to it, and ultimately to know ourselves, it is necessary not merely to be in it but to change – however minutely – that cultural world. This is a making specific – in relation to the social group or individual and its conditions of life – of the ways in which the received natural and social world is made human *to them* and made, to however small a degree (even if finally symbolic), controllable by them.

The possibility of such control is, of course, a collective principle for the possibility of political action on the largest scale. But it also has importance in the individual and collective awareness of the ability to control symbols and their cultural work. Grounded aesthetics produce an edge of meaning which not only reflects or repeats what exists, but transforms what exists – received expressions and appropriated symbols as well as what they represent or are made to represent in some identifiable way.

In so called 'primitive art' and culture, for instance, a central theme is the naming of fundamental forces as gods and demons, thereby to reveal them, make them somehow knowable and therefore subject to human persuasion or placation. Of course, the urban industrial world is much more complex in its organization than are 'primitive' societies, and our apparent technical control over the threatening forces of nature seems greater and different in kind from theirs. What we seek to control, persuade or humanize through grounded aesthetics may be, in part, the force and expression of other human beings rather than forces emanating directly from nature – if you like the work of culture on culture.

A sense of or desire for timelessness and universality may be part of the impulse of a grounded aesthetic. The natural, obvious and immutable become particular historical constructions capable of variation. Subjectivity, taken to some degree out of the particular, is the force which can change it. But we may equally focus on the particular extracted from its context to make sense of the universal (Blake's grain of sand). Such psychic separation may be part of and/or a condition for some grounded aesthetics.

This is not to say that 'universals' really exist, certainly not internally in 'art-objects'. It is extraordinary how many universals – and contradictory ones – are claimed. Nevertheless, experienced universalism, as a movement out of or reperception of the particular, may well be a universal feature of heightened human awareness. This universalism is also a kind of awareness of the future in terms of what it is possible to become. This is part of heightened aspiration and the quest for wider significance and expanded identity. Universalism also gives some vision of the kind of socialness and human mutuality which might locate better and more expanded identities. Grounded aesthetics provide a motivation towards realizing different futures, and for being in touch with the self as a dynamic and creative force for bringing them about.

The received sense of the 'aesthetic' emphasizes the cerebral, abstract or sublimated quality of beauty. At times it seems to verge on the 'an-aesthetic' – the suppression of all senses. By contrast we see grounded aesthetics as working through the senses, through

sensual heightening, through joy, pleasure and desire, through 'fun' and the 'festive'.

Concrete skills, concretely acquired rather than given through natural distinction or gift, are involved in the exercise of grounded aesthetics. 'Economy', and 'skill', for instance, enter into the grounded aesthetics of how the body is used as a medium of expression. A bodily grounded aesthetic enters into personal style and presence, dance and large areas of music and performance.

Although they are not things, grounded aesthetics certainly have uses. Such uses concern the energizing, developing and focusing of vital human powers on to the world in concrete and practical ways, but also in lived connected cognitive ways. This is in producing meanings, explanations and pay-offs in relation to concrete conditions and situations which seem more efficient or adequate than other proffered official or conventional meanings. Such 'useful' meanings may well have moral dimensions in providing collective and personal principles of action, co-operation, solidarity, distinction or resistance.

But 'useful' meanings can also be very private. There are perhaps especially private, symbolic and expressive therapies for the injuries of life. They 'work', not through their direct musical, literary or philosophical forms, but through the ways in which a grounded aesthetic produces meanings and understandings which were not there before. This may involve internal, imaginative and spiritual life. It may be in the realm of dream and fantasy, in the realm of heightened awareness of the constructedness and constructiveness of the self: alienation from obvious givens and values; the sense of a future made in the present changing the present; the fear of and fascination for the 'terra incognita' of the self. The usefulness of grounded aesthetics here may be in the holding and repairing, through some meaning creation and human control even in desperate seas, of the precariousness and fragmentedness of identity whose source of disturbance is outside, structural and beyond the practical scope of individuals to influence.

The crucial failure and danger of most cultural analysis are that dynamic, living grounded aesthetics are transformed and transferred into ontological properties of things, objects and artefacts which may represent and sustain aesthetics but which are, in fact, separate. The aesthetic effect is not *in* the text or artefact. It is part of the sensuous/emotive/cognitive creativities of human receivers, especially as they produce a stronger sense of emotional and cognitive identity as expanded capacity and power – even if only in the possibility of *future* recognitions of a similar kind. These creativities are not dependent on texts, but might be enabled by them.¹⁶

Surprising meanings and creativities can be generated from unpromising materials through grounded aesthetics. But texts and artefacts can also fail to mediate symbolic meanings for many reasons. Many supply only a narrow or inappropriate (for particular audiences) range of symbolic resources. Others encourage *reification* (literally, making into a thing) rather than the *mediation* and enablement of the possibility of grounded aesthetics. They move too quickly to supply a putative aesthetic. The receivers are simply sent a 'message', the meaning of which is pre-formed and pre-given. Signs are pinned succinctly and securely to their meanings. Human receivers are allowed no creative life of their own. The attempt to encapsulate directly an aesthetic militates against the possibility of its realization through a grounded aesthetic because the space for symbolic work of reception has been written out.

There are many ways in which the 'official arts' are removed from the possibility of a living symbolic *mediation*, even despite their possible symbolic richness and range. Most of them are out of their time and, even though this should enforce no veto on current *mediation*, the possibilities of a relevant structuring of symbolic interest are obviously limited. The institutions and practices which support 'art', however, seem designed to break any living links or possibilities of inducing a grounded aesthetic appropriation. 'Official' art equates aesthetics with artefacts. In literature, for instance, all of our current social sense is read *into* the text as its 'close reading' – the legacy of deadness left by I. A. Richards and F. R. Leavis. Art objects are put into the quietness and stillness of separate institutions – which might preserve them, but not their relation to the exigencies of current necessary symbolic work. The past as museum, Art as objects! The reverence and distance encouraged by formality, by institutions, and by the rites of liberal-humanist education as 'learning the code', kill dead, for the vast majority, what the internal life of signs might offer through grounded aesthetics to current sensibility and social practice. It is as hard for the 'official arts' to offer themselves to grounded aesthetics, as it is for grounded aesthetics to find recognition in the formal canons.

Commercial cultural commodities, conversely, offer no such impediments. At least cultural commodities – for their own bad reasons – are aimed at exchange and therefore at the possibility of use. In responding to, and attempting to exploit, current desires and needs, they are virtually guaranteed to offer some relevance to the tasks of current socially necessary symbolic work. In crucial senses, too, the modern media precisely 'mediate' in passing back to audiences, at least in the first instance, symbolic wholes they've

taken from the streets, dance-halls and everyday life. Along with this they may also take, however imperfectly and crudely, a field of aesthetic tensions from daily life and from the play of grounded aesthetics there.

Of course, part of the same restless process is that cultural commodities, especially style and fashion 'top end down', may become subject overwhelmingly to reification, symbolic rationalization and the drastic reduction of the symbolic resources on offer. But consumers move too. When cultural commodities no longer offer symbolic mediation to grounded aesthetics, they fall 'out of fashion'. And in the cumulative symbolic landscape of consumer capitalism, dead packaged, reified grounded aesthetics are turned back into primary raw material for other processes of inevitable necessary symbolic work, with only the cultural theorists paranoically labouring back along their 'meta-symbolic' routes to 'golden age' symbolic homologues. This commercial process may, to say the least, be flawed, but it offers much more to grounded aesthetics than do the dead 'official arts'.

There may well be a better way, a better way to cultural emancipation than through this continuous instability and trust in the hidden – selfish, blind, grabbing – hand of the market. But 'official art' has not shown it yet. Commercial cultural commodities are all most people have. History may be progressing through its bad side. But it progresses. For all its manifest absurdities, the cultural market may open up the way to a better way. We have to make our conditions of life before we can dominate and use them. Cultural pessimism offers us only road-blocks.

Against post-modernist pessimism

The much commented upon incandescence – instability, changeability, luminosity – of cultural commodities ('all that is solid melts into air'¹⁷) is not some form of spontaneous combustion in commodities or another 'wonder' of capitalist production. It is not without or against meaning. This very incandescence passes through *necessary symbolic work*, changes and enables it. The incandescence is not simply a surface market quality. It produces, is driven by, and reproduces further forms and varieties for everyday symbolic work and creativity, some of which remain in the everyday and in common culture far longer than they do on the market.

The market is the source of a permanent and contradictory revolution in everyday culture which sweeps away old limits and dependencies. The markets' restless search to find and make new appetites raises, wholesale, the popular currency of symbolic

aspiration. The currency may be debased and inflationary, but aspirations now circulate, just as do commodities. That circulation irrevocably makes or finds its own new worlds.

The style and media theorists – and terrorists – of the left and right see only market incandescence. They warn us of an immanent semiotic implosion of all that is real. They call us to a strange rejection of all that glitters and shimmers over the dark landscape, as if it *were* the landscape. But this usually metropolitan neurosis is nothing more than a bad case of idealist theorists' becoming the victims of their own nightmares. Mistaking their own metaphors for reality, they are hoist by their own semiotic petards. They are caught by – defined in professionally charting – the symbolic life on the surface of things without seeing, because not implicated in, the *necessary* everyday role of symbolic work, of how sense is made of structure and contradiction. They then coolly announce that modern culture is all surface in danger of collapse.

We must catch up with the movement of the real world. We must not be satisfied with a phantom history and demonology of its surface movement. Above all, self-deluding and complacent beliefs in aesthetic self-sufficiency and separateness, as sanctuaries in and against an imaginary history, must be firmly rejected.

Commerce and consumerism have helped to release a profane explosion of everyday symbolic life and activity. The genie of common culture is out of the bottle – let out by commercial carelessness. Not stuffing it back in, but seeing what wishes may be granted, should be the stuff of our imagination.

Notes

- 1 Raymond Williams, 'Culture is ordinary' (1958), reprinted in his *Resources of Hope*, Verso, 1988.
- 2 We are thinking of the line that runs through from Cobbett, Blake, Ruskin and William Morris.
- 3 See, for instance, *A Holy Tradition of Working*, Golgonooza Press, 1983.
- 4 For a full account of the 'new social condition of youth' in relation to youth unemployment, see P. Willis *et al.*, *The Youth Review*, Avebury, 1988.
- 5 'Leisure' is a difficult term which only roughly indicates our intended meaning. We use it only because of the lack of well-known or meaningful alternatives. Problems with the term include the way it can be extended to cover the oppressions of unemployment by calling it 'free time'; the inadequacy of framing women's informal creativity as 'leisure' when the home more even than paid

labour is a site of repetitive and boring work for them and when their freedom to move out of doors is curtailed by violence and the fear of violence; most importantly, the inconsequential and optional nature of what is usually meant by 'leisure'.

- 6 The following discussion of the symbolic components of work is necessarily rather truncated. It refers only to symbolic activity in relation to the *intrinsic* or *official* elements of deskilled modern work. Though it is not our direct focus here, we would certainly not deny that work continues to be an important *general* and inter-linked site of cultural experience. Cultures of work are varied, contradictory, inner and outer related, and have to be carefully dissected. There continues to be an unofficial richness in work relations which is directed against the coercion or bankruptcy of its official requirements. This links outwards to effect forms of free-time informality and intimacy, but unofficial work cultures also fully utilize and attempt to make space for many of the forms, interests and communications of 'leisure' and 'free time'. Work continues to be where many people spend most of their time, where they find their main social contacts and where their and their dependents' living and leisuring are earned. These are all crucial relationships to be made sense of at a cultural level (both in and out of work), even if leisure and informal rather than 'shop floor' resources are increasingly used for this sense-making. The study of this needs, and must await, another book.
- 7 R. Blackburn and M. Mann, *The Working Class in the Labour Market*, Macmillan, 1979.
- 8 P. Willis, *Learning to Labour*, Gower, 1977.
- 9 See, for instance, a recent summary reviewed in the *Financial Times* (24 August 1989), A. Lindbeck and D. J. Snomer, *The Insider-Outsider Theory of Employment and Unemployment*, MIT, 1989.
- 10 None of this amounts to welcoming or justifying mass unemployment. All studies show that the vast majority of young people find almost any kind of work preferable to unemployment. However, this tells us more about the extreme negative qualities of worklessness – poverty, total boredom, exclusion from 'leisure' and consumption, isolation, depression – than it does about any positive quality in work.
- 11 A point first made and developed in a working summary paper by Geoff Hurd.
- 12 This was suggested by Stephen Yeo in conversation.
- 13 *A Holy Tradition of Work*, op. cit, page 97.
- 14 See the first major study of youth culture in Britain, Mark Abrams, *The Teenage Consumer*, London Press Exchange, 1959.

- 15 We're bending the stick of argument here to emphasize how cultural products are creatively *used*, rather than passively *consumed*. We should not, of course, ignore the continuing ubiquity of forms of direct cultural production such as writing, photography and 'story-ing' (c.f. D. Morley and K. Worpole, *The Republic of Letters*, Comedia, 1981; S. Beszceret and P. Corrigan, *Towards a Different Image*, Comedia/Methuen, 1986; S. Yeo, *Whose Story?*, Blackwell, 1990). Equally, against élitism, we should recall activities like knitting and gardening as combining both production and use. Our general argument here should not obscure that varieties of such 'home produce' are important fields for symbolic work and creativity.
 - 16 It is possible to get into a fine and tautological argument about the distinctions and relationships between 'invisible' internal subjective meanings and external 'visible' signs, symbols and practices. Though we insist that grounded aesthetics are a quality of living processes of meaning-making, not of things, this is not necessarily a wholly invisible internal process, though it can be. Words, signs, symbols and practices as 'things' in the world can certainly be part of the operation of particular grounded aesthetics for particular people. They are also taken in by and made sense of in the meaning-making of others. Also we recognize and, in what follows, give many examples of the possibility of grounded aesthetics becoming properly externalized: formalized, made concrete and public in some way. We argue for this as a process which decisively blurs and questions the conventional distinctions between consumption and production. What's crucial here, though, is not the 'thing-like' qualities of such externalizations, but their capacity both to reflect and promote the grounded aesthetics of their producers and of others, individuals and collectivities.
- Our internal subjective meanings will never transcend or make redundant the 'given-ness' of textuality, of things, of forms, of symbols. Indeed these latter are intrinsic to the possibility and creativity of human meanings, but they should always be seen transitively for their role in the mediation of human meaning. They're humble, malleable things, not the kings and queens of expression and experience. In particular, we should understand that processes of human meaning-making and creativity are stopped dead when aesthetics are attached to things instead of to human activities.
- 17 The title of a book by Marshall Berman (Simon and Schuster, New York, 1982) which helped to launch the many faceted and pervasive post-modern debate.