ABOUT THE COVER

The cover features a detail from Liza Lou's monumental work *Kitchen*, a room-size sculpture measuring 8 × 11 × 14 feet and covered with an estimated 10 million beads. *Kitchen* took Lou five years (1991–5) to create, and it made its public debut in 1996 at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York as part of the "Labor of Love" show curated by Marcia Tucker. *Kitchen* has since traveled to museums around the world.

In 2002, Liza Lou was awarded a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship for her work.

Many thanks to Marcia Tucker for introducing me to Liza Lou's work, and to Liza herself for her kind permission to reproduce this detail from *Kitchen* as an emblem of the dazzling and ingenious aesthetics of cultural studies.

Thanks also to Janet Lyon for pulling Marcia Tucker's *Labor of Love* off the shelf, opening it to the photo of *Kitchen*, and saying, "this would make a *great* cover."

THE AESTHETICS OF CULTURAL STUDIES

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The Burden of Culture

JONATHAN STERNE

With apologies to Hayden White

For the past few decades many writers in cultural studies have found it useful to employ a Fabian tactic against critics in related fields of intellectual endeavor.[1] It works like this: when criticized by literary critics or ethnographers for an insufficiently rich notion of culture, cultural studies writers reply that they are interested in the political dimensions of culture, rather than culture (or aspects thereof) as a thing in itself. If culture is always implicated in the very real social struggles of people's material existence, then we cannot simply pass aesthetic and political judgments about the meanings or implications of practices for all time. Or rather, we *can* make transcendental judgments, but they are by definition politically irrelevant. All this is to suggest that cultural studies is a resolutely political enterprise that uses its analysis of culture as an intellectual strategy; culture is a means to an end. At the same time, critics on the left decry cultural studies scholarship for lacking a radical political orientation and limiting political struggle to the domain of culture. Cultural studies writers in turn respond that culture is more complex than the left critics would have it. To seek out the liberatory or repressive aspects of cultural practices is not enough: culture is more than simply a means to political liberation or subjugation. These two arguments overlap in uncomfortable ways. One claims that the political dimension of culture is what matters to cultural studies. The other claims that culture has to be conceived as something more than an instrument of politics.

Of course, there are all sorts of details buried in the above paragraph. "Culture" and "politics" are heavily conflicted terms. They may mean different things to different parties in the discussion. But this Fabian tactic does reveal a fundamental contradiction at the heart of much of the best (and worst) of cultural studies scholarship. In order to do our work, we need an instrumental theory of culture. Through carefully contextualized and theoretically informed analyses, we show that cultural practices, texts, meanings, and events all point to something more significant inside or outside themselves. In a word, they are political, and politics is why culture matters in cultural studies. This is an instrumental theory of culture because it casts culture – whether conceived as texts, practices, or a whole way of life – as a means to an end. Stuart Hall's oft-quoted hope for cultural studies, that it would be "politics by other means," becomes cultural studies' hope for culture. Cultural politics become the privileged domain of political struggle for cultural studies scholars because it takes its place as that "other means" for political struggle. The field is organized around the premise that culture *matters* for politics, even if we cannot know in advance how it will matter.

At the same time, the political dimensions of culture are rarely enough to draw or sustain the passion of cultural studies scholars. In informal discussions, if not in formal writing and presentation, many of us are aware of a "something more" to culture than its political content. In fact, politics sometimes comes secondarily – scholars begin with aspects of culture for which they have an affinity and then seek to discover their political content. A great deal of the cultural studies literature on "popular culture" falls into this camp. Despite claims to reflexivity and promises to explain the author's own investment in a cultural practice, this move tends to bolster the instrumental theory of culture, at least when scholars try to justify their personal pleasures in political terms.

My thesis in this essay is that cultural studies occupies an uncertain terrain in part because of a primarily instrumental notion of culture, a notion of culture upon which the field depends for its intellectual and political vitality. As I will show, cultural studies' instrumental theory of culture is immensely useful for negative critiques of cultural practices and social relationships. In other words, culture conceived as a "means" is a very useful concept if you want to critique capitalism, colonialism, sexism, racism, homophobia, neoliberalism, and the various other "isms" to which most cultural studies writers are (or should be) in principle opposed. The "culture-as-means" concept allows all sorts of useful moves: we can criticize a cultural practice as furthering or reinstantiating some system of relations we oppose. We can also find cultural practices that challenge or even transform extant power relations. This is the familiar terrain of cultural Marxism and Gramsci-influenced cultural studies in the guise of "resistance/recuperation" debates. It is also prevalent among cultural studies work influenced by other strains of Continental thought, like Saussurean semiotics and the various strands of thought broadly labeled as "poststructuralist." In the case of cultural studies writers who draw on Foucault (myself included), the resistance/

recuperation question has been displaced from a specific practice to the organization of relations of power. In other words, some writers have moved from the results of power relations to an analysis of their composition. But even transformed as a mechanics of power (or "microphysics," to use Foucault's term), the idea of culture as a means to a political end persists.

So why write another commentary that criticizes the critical stances of cultural studies? The answer is simple: the instrumental notion of culture needs supplementation. For cultural studies, it is necessary but not sufficient. Alone, it is a political dead end: it carries with it a reactive notion of politics and a deferral of social and political imagination. It reduces what ought to be to what is. The instrumental notion of culture falls down when we begin to articulate our political project in positive terms: criticizing "what is" in terms of what "ought to be." In and of itself, the instrumental notion of culture contributes nothing to the project of conceiving a culture or society in which people would want to live. It's actually a kind of negative faith: "if we turn culture into politics, maybe things will get better." Where the culture industry looks to each possible text or practice as a means to revenue generation, cultural studies considers each text or practice in terms of its possible and actual political uses. As Lawrence Grossberg and others have pointed out, this idea of culture as a political tool has been appropriated by the right as well; it is not a uniquely left-wing idea (Grossberg 1992; Bertsch 1994).

"Culture" in cultural studies is an entity that always points to things outside itself. This is an immensely powerful tool of critique, but as a political program it descends into politico-pragmatic managerialism. Though we cannot know ahead of time the effects of any given cultural practice, the underlying logic appears to be that we should seek out cultural practices that have the right effects. This is a useful pragmatics (which is not the same thing as pragmatism), but it is not a compelling political program in and of itself. Nobody (at least nobody I know) wants to live in a world where his or her every action is a means to a political end. Political pragmatics assume that some other debate about the good will happen or has happened. We can either enter into cultural studies with a pre-given political program, like socialism, feminism, environmentalism, antiracism, queer politics, and so forth, or we can defer our political judgments to "the last instance," which, like the Althusserian moment of determination, never arrives for the cultural studies scholar – at least not in writing. As it stands, compared to the vast amount of writing dedicated to explaining what we in cultural studies should be *against*, comparatively little writing exists in cultural studies about what we should be *for.*

This is not a call for Habermasian proceduralism or grounding cultural studies in other branches of "normative" philosophy. Rather, it is to argue that we always already carry with us implicit visions of the good in our writing – a point demonstrated at some length by Amanda Anderson. By attending to, and even debating those visions of the good, we will be better able to understand politics in proactive as well as reactive terms, and therefore more strategically – which, after all, is supposed to be the goal of cultural studies. We need a more vigorous political imagination.

This is a very difficult position to argue, since outside of normative philosophy, explicit "should" questions are rarely seen as legitimate scholarly activities. It sounds unduly grand, pompous, elitist, even vanguardist to argue that academics should have debates about the social good. After all, who are we to dictate to others? But in principle, there is no reason why Stuart Hall's call for modesty in cultural theorizing couldn't also be applicable here: the point isn't to theorize "the good" and "the should" once and for all for everyone, but rather to simply think about how those kinds of conceptions already inform our writing, and to orient our writing toward those visions of the good that we find most appropriate or beneficial. The need for theory is as pressing at this level as it is at the level of cultural description: we need to fashion concepts to interrogate and rethink the obvious, the thinkable, the possible (on this point, see, e.g., Hall 1978; see also Fraser 1989 and McClure 1992). Cultural studies has long taken as gospel the idea that cultural objects, texts, and practices are not synonymous with their surface appearances. Why should we arbitrarily give up the intellectual vocation at the point of "is" before asking questions of what should be? If questions of political vision weren't so often taken for granted in cultural studies writing, this point would be too banal to be worth an essay.

Following C. Wright Mills (1959), our task is both to provide compelling and useful explanations of social and cultural life, and to create and debate alternatives to these existing ways of life. Our relative institutional independence from social movements is a double-edged sword – we can and do descend into navel gazing, but it also affords us the necessary luxury of sustained speculation and theorizing. This speculation is a luxury because not everyone is afforded the opportunity. But it is a necessity because as context changes, so too must our questions.

This chapter explores cultural studies' instrumental definition of culture in two contexts. Using the work of and around Stuart Hall as its anchor, the next section shows how cultural studies has come to rely on an instrumental definition of culture. Using the debates around the work of John Fiske (and "resistance theory" in general), the subsequent section shows how instrumental definitions of culture limit the possibilities for positive political vision, regardless of what position one takes within the debate. The conclusion explores some way in which we might usefully supplement instrumental notions of culture in cultural studies. Let me be clear from the outset: I am not attacking in any universal way the idea of an instrumental notion of culture. It is certainly necessary for the kinds of work done in cultural studies. I am simply arguing that an instrumental theory of culture is not sufficient. I should add that much of the scholarship discussed in this piece may be considered as "dated" in the sense that most of the authors have moved on to other questions: Hall has moved into questions of race and globalization (among other things), and late in his career, Fiske significantly qualified the populist position for which he is famous. The point is not to freeze these scholars in time but rather to argue that their earlier writings are still relevant because contemporary cultural studies – especially in the United States – is still very much concerned with the issues raised in this earlier work. So perhaps this essay carries with it a sense of canonicity in referring back to a set of core texts or at least a preoccupation with continuity, since I continue a conversation that cultural studies scholars have been having for over 40 years – and wish to point out that its longevity is itself worthy of critical reflection.

STUART HALL, BRITISH CULTURAL STUDIES, AND THE INSTRUMENTALITY OF CULTURE

In perhaps the most succinct-yet-compelling definition of the vast cross-disciplinary mangle of scholarship known as cultural studies, Tony Bennett has written that cultural studies is "a term of convenience for a fairly dispersed array of theoretical and political positions which, however widely divergent they might be in other respects, share a commitment to examining cultural practices from the point of view of their intrication with, and within, relations of power" (1992: 23). For Bennett and others, that "intrication" or entanglement is actually more of a deployment – culture is a way of working out power relations. Though it is not necessarily the case, historically, the assertion that culture is political has led cultural studies scholars to consider it as a means to a political end. As Cary Nelson, Paula Treichler, and Lawrence Grossberg have written, "cultural studies cannot be used to denigrate a whole class of cultural objects, though it can certainly indict the uses to which those objects have been put" (1992: 13). The term "uses" is the key hinge of the sentence. The example of culture here is objects, and cultural studies is less concerned with the objects in themselves than their existence as means – the uses to which they are put. The same could be said for culture conceived of practices, "formations" or any of the other metaphors used in cultural studies. This instrumentality is built into the history of the field. After all, one of the earliest cultural studies books is entitled *The Uses of Literacy.*

This section briefly explores the instrumental status of "culture" in the writings of Stuart Hall (and in a few writings in Hall's intellectual neighborhood). Regardless of whether Hall is "representative" of cultural studies in a sociological sense, he certainly "represents" cultural studies because of his role in the field's development. Hall's work explicitly thematizes and develops an instrumental notion of culture for the purposes of political analysis and critique. His Gramscian politics of culture is still very influential across disciplines, and many writers still analyze culture in Gramscian terms. Hall's contribution to this approach to culture is singular, and in that sense, he may very well be descriptively representative of the field. So if I may hedge for the moment on questions of who speaks as or for cultural studies, a consideration of Hall's work and its intellectual neighborhood will usefully illustrate my point.

Hall's interest in culture has always been directly political. His famous passage in "Notes on Deconstructing the Popular" succinctly summarizes his view of culture's significance: "Popular culture is one of the sites where this struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged: it is also the stake to be won or lost in that struggle. It is the arena of consent and resistance. It is partly where hegemony arises and where it is secured. It is not a sphere where socialism, a socialist culture – already fully formed – might be simply expressed. But it is one of the places where socialism might be constituted. That is why popular culture matters. Otherwise, to tell you the truth, I don't give a damn about it" (1981: 239). These are strong words, and leaving aside whether Hall is exaggerating for polemical purposes, the point is clear: politics is the reason to care about popular culture. In fact, politics is the reason to care about culture at all. For Hall, culture is to be conceived as a political tool. This is its ultimate value: if you can't *do* something with popular culture, then there's no point to it.

Culture is of course a central term in the history and mission of cultural studies both before and after Hall. Hall's scholarship clearly builds on the works of earlier scholars like Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, and E. P. Thompson. Williams, especially, was preoccupied with the concept of culture. His oft-cited line that it is "one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language" (1975: 76) probably says more about the valuation of culture in cultural studies than the actual complexity of the term. There is no doubt that culture is a dizzyingly complex concept for the field, but plenty of other words exhibit similar complexity and slipperiness in their own disciplinary milieus. Williams's career was built around a singular obsession with the concept and status of culture, so his evaluation comes as no surprise. But this quote from *Keywords* also speaks directly to an investment in culture as a privileged object of thought and practice. It carries forth a sense that culture matters, but also a sense that culture *should* matter.

For his part, Williams bears a strong debt to conservative cultural critics like F. R. Leavis and T. S. Eliot. Eliot, especially, influenced the notion of culture as a "whole way of life" as Williams developed it in *Culture and Society* (1958) and *The Long Revolution* (1961). But as Hall writes, Williams was a kind of "lone Marxist" at this point in his career. Though he understood culture as a field of struggle, he had not articulated an explicit theoretical vocabulary for describing that struggle (Hall 1980: 59–60). This was also one axis of E. P. Thompson's critique of *The Long Revolution*: Williams's history is heavily depersonalized. Thompson writes of Williams's "determination to de-personalize social forces and at the same time to avoid certain terms which might associate him with a simplified version of the class struggle which he rightly believes to be discredited" (1961: 26). Thompson's complaint is that through depersonalizing history – talking about large-scale processes rather than in terms of specific historical actors – Williams deemphasizes struggle, bracketing questions of winners and losers and shifting accounts of the ways in which "men have made history" toward accounts of how "history happened" (ibid.).[2]

Williams's depersonalization of culture, however, was part of his larger reevaluation of it. As a socialist, Williams sought to rescue culture as a singular term, properly owned by the elite and widely believed by that elite to be in decline. This is one reason why Eliot is one of Williams's influences: while Eliot believed culture was a whole way of life that belonged to the few, Williams argued that culture was ordinary – it was indeed a whole way of life, but a way of life that belonged to the many. He challenged "this extraordinary decision to call certain things culture and then separate them, as with a park wall, from ordinary people and ordinary work" (Williams 1958).

So descriptive depersonalization was a kind of universalizing move in Williams. His was a project of validation, something that many later cultural studies scholars – especially Hall – would continue. The idea was to examine everyday practices as valid and important expressions of cultural life, and through that, to see the working class as a valid producer and agent of culture. At the same time, the aim was supposed to be realistic: rather than idealizing working-class culture by acting as if it necessarily embodied a socialist sensibility, Williams and his contemporaries sought to consider it for its political potential, and through the consideration of that political potential, contribute to the project of social transformation. As Hall would put it, popular culture became a site where socialism *might* be constituted.

Among other things, Hall's contribution was to build on Williams's culture concept but to foreground and thematize conflict. If Hoggart (1957/1992), Williams (1958, 1961), and Thompson (1964) aimed to democratize the concept of culture and in the process politicized it, if they moved it from a singular "practice" to a domain of practices, Hall highlighted the dimension of "struggle" as the most important axis for cultural analysis. For Williams, Hoggart, and Thompson, culture is "interwoven with all social practices"; culture is "*both* the meanings and values which arise amongst distinctive social grounds and classes, on the basis of their given historical conditions and relationships, through which they 'handle' and respond to the condition of existence; *and* the lived traditions and practices through which those 'understandings' are expressed and in which they are embodied" (Hall 1980: 63). Hall argued that this "culturalist" mode of cultural studies existed in useful tension with a "structuralist" mode of cultural studies. In fact his own career represents something of an attempt to synthesize these approaches. Hall says that he parts company with the poststructuralists when they say that society *is* language, but that the metaphor "structured *like* a language" has been immensely useful to him because it provided a way to conceptualize the circulation of meaning within a determinate system (see Hall 1986; 1988a).

In particular, Hall's advocacy of the conceptions of hegemony (via a reading of Antonio Gramsci) and articulation (via a reading of Ernesto Laclau) illustrate his commitment to an instrumental theory of culture as a tool of political critique and his particular combination of culturalism and structuralism. They also show us the flip-side of the commitment: the need to show that culture is about doing something. Hegemony usefully conceptualized the role of struggle in cultural life for Hall. Culture was the site where social groups fought for political control of a society. In Gramsci's idea of hegemony, writes Hall, "we discover the beginnings of a way of conceptualizing how classes, constituted at the fundamental level of production relations, come to provide the basis of the social authority," the political sway and cultural domination a "class alliance on behalf of capital" without a narrowly conceived "class interest" driving historical relations and social forces (1977: 66). In other words, hegemony enables some of the theoretical concepts dearest to British cultural studies: negotiated power blocs among fractured social groups instead of a dominant class; competing worldviews and articulations of "common sense" rather than a single top-down conception of ideology; and meanings and practices as *negotiating* power relations instead of simple subordination of nondominant groups. In Hall's vision of hegemony, culture and the superstructure become vital sites through which the base might be transformed.

Since the goal of cultural analysis *via* hegemony is clearly the production of a political analysis, culture becomes the means to the political end. If hegemony requires consent, and is manufactured in the cultural domain, then the cultural domain is of primary interest because it is a means toward maintaining or transforming social power. Hegemony played an important theoretical role in two of the major collaborative projects that Hall undertook during the 1970s. In the introduction to *Resistance Through Rituals* (Hall & Jefferson 1995), John Clarke, Stuart Hall, Tony Jefferson, and Brian Roberts use hegemony as a grounding framework for the related studies in the collection. For them, youth subcultures are interesting as alternative means to political ends. They are tools for negotiating working-class identity, for working out youths' relations to the dominant culture:

> There is no "sub-cultural solution" to working-class youth unemployment, educational disadvantage, compulsory miseducation, dead-end jobs, the routinization and specialization of labour, low pay, and the loss of skills. Sub-cultural strategies cannot match, meet or answer the structuring dimen-

> sion emerging in this period for the class as a whole. So, when the post-war sub-cultures address the problematics of their class experience, they often do so in ways which reproduce the gaps and discrepancies between real negotiation and symbolically displaced "resolutions." They "solve," but in an imaginary way, problems which at the concrete material level remain unsolved. Thus the "Teddy boy" expropriation of an upper class style of dress "covers" the gap between largely manual, unskilled, near-lumpen real careers and life-chances and the "all-dressed-up-and-nowhere-to-go" experience of Saturday evening. Thus, in the expropriation and fetishization of consumption and style itself, the "Mods" cover for the gap between the never-ending-weekend and Monday's resumption of boring, dead-end work. (Hall & Jefferson 1995: 48)

Subcultural theory is a particularly powerful example of the politics-by-other-means sensibility, since it is primarily interested in youth culture, and oriented around activities that had hitherto been understood as deviant, aberrant, or otherwise antisocial. Subcultural theory reconstructed these practices as deeply social and politically significant. From this point forward in subcultural theory, there would be an enduring need for cultural practices to be "doing something." Even when they were self-consciously "doing nothing," working-class youth were doing "something" politically through their actions and stances. This "doing somethingness" in turn bolstered an instrumental theory of culture because it construed youth subcultures as means to political and social ends. The essays in *Resistance Through Rituals* do not present a strictly a functionalist analysis in Durkheim's sense (contrast with, for example, the discussion of mechanical solidarity in Durkheim 1933), because of the key element of struggle within social relationships. The above quote reads subculture as a way of "working out" or "working through" class-based oppression even as the subculture itself cannot possibly "solve" the problems of class oppression. Though as Angela McRobbie (1991) has pointed out, the options for "working through" and "working out" class position are heavily shaped by gender as well. But if culture is not functional, it is instrumental because the subculture struggles "by other means" – the means in this case being cultural expression. So even when they are hanging about "doing nothing," subcultural youth are doing something because cultural activity is itself an arena of struggle. In this classic cultural studies text, subculture becomes a means to a political end.

As a response to law-and-order discourses about youth on the one hand and sociological "deviance" literature on the other, *Resistance Through Rituals* aimed to do for youth culture what Williams had done for culture in general: to show that culture is an arena of struggle, to argue that it mattered – to validate it in an academic context – and to take it seriously as a political problem. Dick Hebdige's subsequent *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979) takes this even further, essentially doing for aesthetics what *Resistance Through Rituals* had done for culture. As Raymond Williams writes in *Keywords*, the idea of the aesthetic

> at once emphasized and isolated subjective sense-activity as the basis of art and beauty as distinct, for example, from *social* or *cultural* interpretations. . . . Like one special meaning of the word *culture*, [aesthetic] is intended to express a human dimension which the dominant version of society appears to exclude. This emphasis is understandable but the isolation can be damaging, for there is something irresistibly displaced and marginal about the now common and limiting phrase "aesthetic considerations," especially when contrasted with *practical* or *utilitarian* considerations, which are elements of the same basic division. (1976: 28, emphasis in original)

Hebdige brought aesthetics back into the domain of culture and society, and in so doing, aimed to more fully politicize aesthetic activity. In his analysis of youth culture, he effectively collapsed the distinction upon which common uses of the idea of the aesthetic were premised: all aesthetic activity was always already practical and utilitarian. Aesthetics, like the domain of culture in general, became a means to an end.

To be absolutely clear, these approaches made a great deal of sense at the time. They were significant and radical analyses at the moment they developed. But in their instrumentalization of culture, they carried with them a prejudice that cultural activity *should* be about doing something more than the activity itself would at first indicate. In subcultural analysis, the "is" and the "ought" of cultural practice were collapsed around the question of culture, as if to say, *culture is politics by other means, and it ought to be.* To be sure, this has something to do with the history of the term "culture" itself. To return to Williams in *Keywords*, culture has roots in an agricultural metaphor: one cultivates plants, and eventually this idea of cultivation was grafted onto persons as well. Cultivation is primarily an instrumental activity: one cultivates something else to a particular end (and even if one cultivates plants for beauty or hobby, the cultivation may still just be a means to an end). This cultivation metaphor makes up only one of three possible modern uses, according to Williams; the other two are "a particular way of life" and "works and practices of intellectual and artistic activity" (1975: 80). Whether it is necessary, I do not know, but I would argue that in cultural studies, the instrumental sense of the first usage of culture has fertilized the other two: ways of life, and intellectual and artistic activities become politics by other means. For cultural studies, they become entry points into politics.

In a certain sense, this is taking aesthetics at its face value. Lots of people committed to aesthetics have argued for aesthetic practice as a form of personal improvement: whether we are talking about Friedrich Nietzsche or Matthew Arnold, aesthetic creation and contemplation are keys to creating a better self.

For its part, cultural studies simply expands the domain of what counts as aesthetics and the ends to which the aesthetic can be put – for instance, in fostering collective consciousness rather than atomized individual improvement. So to treat culture, especially in its aesthetic dimensions, as a means to an end is not an abandonment of aesthetic approaches to culture but rather an extension and generalization of those approaches.

Of course, the "politics of culture" argument extends far beyond subculture theory. To return to Hall's work, his appropriation of the "by other means" motif is perhaps most powerful in his work that deals with politics in the more narrow sense of states and governments. In *Policing the Crisis* (Hall et al. 1977), we have a familiar understanding of the news media as a "field of ideological struggle" where competing interests fight to create and assign meaning to events – very similar to youth subcultures. Hall's later work on Thatcherism (e.g., Hall 1988a and 1988b) would also make use of Gramscian theory to locate culture as a site of struggle where hegemony must constantly be rebuilt and rewon. In fact, this usage is much closer to Gramsci's original conceptualization of hegemony, since he was talking about the state and civil society and clearly had in mind a parliamentary model of politics as part of that state. Of course, Hall's work on Thatcher, though arguably a more seminal application of Gramscian political theory, has not translated as well in the United States. Many writers have noted that while the writings on subculture have enjoyed an enthusiastic reception in the United States, the writings on British politics and the state are less widely read across the Atlantic. This is probably, in part, a result of Americans' ignorance of British politics, but also the different situations of British and "American" cultural studies (insofar as there is such a thing): while Hall and the other major cultural studies figures were (and continue to be) actively involved in left party politics, fewer cultural studies scholars writing in the US have maintained the same level of political involvement, or at least reflected it in their work. This can be attributed to many factors – for instance, the absence of a clearly "left" major political party in the United States, the differing positions of American academics versus their British or Australian counterparts, etc. But for my argument, the effect is perhaps more important than the cause: on this side of the Atlantic, "hegemony" has seen lots of play as a term to be applied to cultural politics more often than it is applied to political culture or what Meaghan Morris (1988) calls the politics of politics.

So Hall uses hegemony as a wedge to talk about the mechanics of cultural politics. His use of "articulation" is similarly instrumental: in fact the very definition of articulation casts it as an instrumental theory of culture that enables us to talk about the ways in which cultural politics can happen. As he explains:

> In England, the term has a nice double meaning because "articulate" means to utter, to speak forth, to be articulate. It carries that sense of language-ing, of expressing, etc. But we also speak of an "articulated" lorry (truck): a lorry where the front "cab" and back "trailer" can, but need not necessarily, be connected to one another. The two parts are connected to each other, but through a specific linkage, that can be broken. An articulation is thus the form of the connection that *can* make a unity of two different elements, under certain circumstances. It is a linkage which is not necessary, determined, absolute, and essential for all time. . . . Thus, a theory of articulation is both a way of understanding how ideological elements come, under certain conditions, to cohere together within a discourse, and a way of asking how they do or do not become articulated, at specific conjunctures, to certain political subjects. (1986: 53)

To drive the truck metaphor a little further, Hall is saying that whatever is in the trailer and whoever is in the cab doesn't necessarily matter, and if it does matter, it matters conjuncturally, situationally. *In theory*, then, any cab can be hitched to any trailer – though you may need a special adapter to hook some pairs together. Once hitched, they can be sent on all sorts of delivery routes. A classic example for articulation theory would be populism: it has "no necessary belongingness" (Hall borrowed this phrase from Laclau 1977), and at different times has been appropriated as a political strategy on the left or the right. But the theory of articulation itself is an instrumental theory of culture: it asks how a particular cultural form, practice, or idea gets attached to others, and then how that attachment gets used politically. That is the very goal of articulation theory: not to consider the in-itself or for-itself of a cultural practice, but rather to discover how it is used in any particular situation. Hall's is a "Marxism without guarantees" in which "history is the struggle to produce the relation within which particular practices have particular meanings and effects, to organize practices into larger structures, to 'inflect' particular practices and subject-positions into relation with political, economic, and culture structures of domination and resistance" (Grossberg 1997: 179). This is why cultural studies can condemn the *use* of a cultural practice or artifact, but it cannot condemn the cultural practice or artifact in itself: it could later be articulated within a wholly different formation.

As I intimated above, I believe Hall's instrumentalism is typical of cultural studies work. More recent incarnations of cultural studies work also depend on the idea that culture is a means to a political end. For instance, the cultural policy studies movement is premised on this very idea. Tony Bennett, in challenging the dominant notions of culture in cultural studies, winds up arguing for a *more* instrumental and pragmatic theory of culture: drawing on Michel Foucault's theory of governmentality, Bennett and other cultural policy studies scholars seek an account of culture as the conduct of conduct, as a modality of person formation and social ordering (e.g., Bennett 1992, 1995, 1997; Hunter 1988; see also Miller 1998 and Sterne 2003). It seems that the commitment to the politics of culture almost demands an analysis of culture as a means to an end. But this is not exactly the case.

THE IMAGINATIVE IMPASSE OF INSTRUMENTALISM: FISKE WARS

Perhaps the most extreme version of cultural studies' instrumental approach to culture appears in John Fiske's work. Fiske was widely popular in the United States (and Australia, I hear) for some time in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and he worked the culture-as-politics-by-other-means thesis until it broke. In this section, I show that the instrumental theory of culture – which reached a sort of natural limit in Fiske's work – is also at work in left criticisms of cultural studies. Fiske the populist argued that culture was valuable because people (audiences, fans, etc.) were active agents in their participation, interpretation, and use of that culture, and more importantly, because that culture was put to political ends. Rather than contesting Fiske's conception of culture altogether, critics of cultural studies' populism – themselves often outside the field – have wholly accepted the instrumental notion of culture. Their criticism is that culture isn't as political as Fiske says it is. But most of them still argue from the position that culture should primarily be understood as a means to a political end. Instrumental theories of culture promoted by cultural studies thus still hold a great deal of significance among the intellectual left.

Because of Fiske's stridently populist position, he has been a favorite whipping post both inside and outside cultural studies. My purpose here is not to criticize (or defend) Fiske's populism, since that's been done to death. In fact, I would venture to argue that at this point it is even more cliché to offer a critique of populism in cultural studies via a reading of Fiske's work than it is to offer a reading of cultural practices as resistance. But before we consider Fiske's detractors, let us for a moment dwell on what the man actually says.

There is no doubt that Fiske identifies himself as a populist and an unrepentant optimist: "I believe the popular forces to be a positive influence in our society and that failing to take proper account of their progressive elements is academically and politically disabling" (Fiske 1989a: 194). Fiske sees his work as continuing the long-term project of validation in cultural studies, where previously denigrated cultural objects are considered for their political potential, and where audiences are considered as active agents rather than cultural "dupes."

But Fiske is also politically programmatic in ways that other cultural studies writers are unwilling to be: he is clear that his is a politics of reform, a progressivism rather than a radicalism. This is because he sees a split between macro- and micro-level social and political processes: there is no simple homology or identity between large-scale social forces and small-scale experience (and here we should hear echoes of Hall's articulation theory). Fiske writes that "we are wrong to expect popular culture to be radical (and thus to criticize it for not being so)" because "popular" motives for social change are different than theoretical or radical ones. For Fiske, this also means that if academics fail to consider popular culture on its own terms, they will be unable to harness popular energies and affective investments for the project of social change. "This does not mean, however, that when historical conditions produce a radical crisis the media and popular culture cannot play an active role in the radical change that may occur: what it means is that symbolic or cultural systems alone cannot produce those historical conditions" (1989a: 188).

Clearly, there's some truth to Fiske's position. Particularly strident political content rarely becomes popular entertainment, both because of the prevailing practices in media industries (something Fiske admittedly does not talk about) and because audiences are not looking for political instruction in their entertainment. That audiences get this instruction anyway is irrelevant to Fiske's point: ideological positions that nudge the status quo call much less attention to themselves than those calling for total social transformation. For Fiske, many cultural texts and practices are popular precisely because they retain some political ambiguity. This is not an ontological condition, but a condition of the capitalist culture industry and a condition of widespread consumption practices in industrial societies.

So if radical messages aren't going to work in the media system, Fiske reasons, then we need to start thinking more incrementally in terms of ground gained or lost in a Gramscian war of position. This is the theoretical basis for his readings of popular culture: it's not that Madonna fandom makes teenage girls into revolutionary feminists but rather that Madonna offers a representation of semiotic and social power to some of her fans and that these "in turn, may empower the fan's sense of self and thus affect her behavior in social situations" (1989b: 113). Clearly, we could dispute Fiske's research methods, his findings, or his orientation – many have. But for the sake of argument, let's take him at his word. All Fiske is really saying here is that Madonna fandom may make some incremental difference in fans' lives. The point strikes me as uncontroversial.

Fiske's work follows logically from the subculture work done 15 years prior – since fans cannot simply transform the material conditions of their lives on their own, they look for ways to deal with their conditions of existence. But here again, we have an instrumental theory of culture at the center of cultural studies practice: popular culture is politics by other means, a means to an end of self-empowerment, making do, and coping. Fiske's instrumentalism becomes its own kind of aesthetics: he prefers texts that are open to interpretation because they allow for audience agency and negotiation. In other words, Fiske explicitly values cultural texts and practices that can be put to political ends (within his particular brand of micropolitics).

Of course, there's much more to it than that. I've chosen not to "go after" Fiske because so many others have, but he clearly offers lots of fodder for hostile readers, occasionally slipping from a more modest reading of making-do to a full-on politics of popular cultural resistance. Fiske is clearly a populist more than he is a committed leftist – though he names capitalism, racism, and patriarchy as oppressive systems, he offers no theory of – or even hope for – systematic change. Instead, he argues for an explicitly reformist platform and then follows through on that political project.

If everyone in cultural studies were doing what Fiske was doing, we would be open to the accusation of a monomaniacal interest in popular culture as resistance. But subculture theory came under criticism inside and outside cultural studies well before Fiske was a significant figure in the field. Shortly after Dick Hebdige's *Subculture* hit the shelves, Gary Clarke (1982) published a substantial critique of subculture theory calling for more attention to political transformation and economic conditions. Judith Williamson attacked consumptionist studies in a 1985 *New Socialist* article. Meaghan Morris criticized Baudrillardian dystopianism and Fiskean populism in an essay that appeared in 1989 – the same year that Fiske's two major textbooks appeared in print. Jim McGuigan's well-researched and carefully reasoned *Cultural Populism* appeared in 1992. That same year, the introduction to the massive conference-based anthology *Cultural Studies* approvingly cites criticisms of populist and affirmative strains in the field, and several essays in the volume take potshots at populist cultural studies. In fact, the discussion following Fiske's essay in that volume consists of the most sustained and hostile audience reaction printed in the whole book – it is astounding to read. A variety of cultural studies scholars repeatedly attack Fiske on theoretical and political grounds: for his theorization of "habitus," his characterization of academic life, his distinctions between the abstract and concrete, his collapsing of everyday practices and great art, his misreading of Marxism, his gender politics, his oppositions between intellectuals and the underclass, and his use of single individuals to describe whole social formations (Fiske 1992: 165–73). In fact, Fiske's later work would modify somewhat the position for which he became famous (see Fiske 1993), though his central interests and concepts remained in this later work. So there is no paucity of critiques of populism within the discourse of cultural studies and Fiske's populism is not representative of the field.

I make this rather mundane point because Fiske-bashing has become a fashionable sport in some sectors of the academy. Leaving aside for the moment more serious and well-informed critiques of populism by writers sympathetic to the cultural studies project, a whole industry of "critiques of cultural studies" has sprung up in History, American Studies, English, Communication Studies, and a host of other fields. As Meaghan Morris wrote of resistance theory in 1989, so we could today write of critiques of cultural studies' populism: I get the feeling that somewhere in some publisher's vault there is a master disk from which thousands of versions of the same article about cultural studies, populism, and left politics are being run off under different names with minor variations (rephrased from Morris 1990: 21). This work exploded quantitatively in the mid-1990s and continues – showing no signs of relenting – to the present day.

These articles and talks all share a set of basic features and they generally follow a Jeremiad form. They begin by hailing the achievements of Hoggart, Williams, Thompson, Hall, and whomever else they like in the British Cultural Studies canon. Having – often in bad faith – established their commitment to classic cultural studies, they then lament cultural studies' subsequent decline into bland populist affirmation of various kind of consumption as political resistance (this is often combined with a discussion of Americanization). The article or talk then concludes with a program for cultural studies to return to its former greatness. With surprising regularity, these critiques refer only to the work of John Fiske in specific (if they refer to any specific works at all), claiming that it represents a "general trend" in the field. There are clearly questionable intellectual ethics in lambasting an entire field on the basis of a trend which it has itself criticized. But this is not my main point. Rather, I believe that while critiques of cultural studies' populism make their stance on the basis of some broadly leftist principle, they often fall into an instrumental description of culture that mirrors the tendency within cultural studies. In other words, despite their greater willingness to make explicitly normative claims, these critics have an equally instrumental description of how culture works and thus built their own aesthetics on the basis of this instrumentality.

I will offer a brief example of external criticisms of cultural studies' populism to illustrate my point about instrumental theories of culture (though others, like McGuigan 1992, Garnham 1995, Czitrom 1995, McChesney 1996, and Gitlin 1997, would also work). My example is drawn from an essay entitled "The Affirmative Character of US Cultural Studies," published in 1990 by Mike Budd, Robert Entman, and Clay Steinman. Their main criticisms would become standard fare over the next decade: cultural studies loses "much of its critical edge" because it overestimates the freedom of media audiences, minimizes the economic dimensions of cultural life, fails to distinguish between mass advertising and specialized media, and confuses active reception with political activity. Additionally, these authors counterpoise cultural studies to political-economic approaches, arguing that what is missing is an analysis of production and a contextualization of consumption. To their credit, they read the work of Lawrence Grossberg and several other cultural studies scholars as well. It is somewhat atypical in that the authors attempt to be responsible scholars and read beyond Fiske into the cultural studies literature. Though it is from 1990, I believe that it speaks to contemporary concerns. But here, let me concentrate on their responses to Fiske.

One of their key arguments is that alternative readings aren't necessarily political. To do so, they return to Fiske's Madonna example, arguing that "we should not make too much of the significance of alternative readings":

> Women who find in Madonna's image the sexual independence they admire may do so without actually altering their personal relationships with men, let

> alone joining feminist organizations. They may admire Madonna and still believe that patriarchal sex roles are natural, resolving internal conflicts in favor of the external forces that they confront. If this were not so, we should see one subversive belief becoming linked to others, leading to visible confrontations with power, especially when subversive readings are as widely available as they are in the realm of feminism. (1990: 178)

Here, they are criticizing Fiske for overestimating the political efficacy of these interpretations, but crucially, they uphold an instrumental model of cultural practice. There's a strong "should" that sits like a pink elephant on the surface of their argument: women who find pleasure in Madonna *should* get more politically active as a result, *but they don't.* Their point is made clear a few sentences below, where they argue that analyses of media need to account for the widespread acquiescence to conservative politics prevalent in America at that time (though they may not have known this, Grossberg was writing on that very question at about the same time their article appeared – see Grossberg 1992). Again, the presumption is that media content and cultural practice does play an important role in political life, and that it should be judged as a means to a political end.

To be fair to Budd, Entman, and Steinman, there's not much to disagree with in their assessment of the political efficacy of alternative readings; though to be fair to Fiske, he already made the point that subversive readings and political action are two different things and that subversive readings do not necessarily lead to organized political action. But the larger point is that both Fiske and his critics want to understand culture as a means to an end – more importantly, they think it *should* be a means to an end.

This becomes explicit a little further along in the article. Budd, Entman, and Steinman posit a zero-sum game between television-watching and subcultural practice: "Further work may well show that one of the most important effects of television has been its theft of time from subcultural experience in favor of exposure to the mass audience programming and advertisements rooted in the 'discourse through and about things'" (1990: 179). The theft metaphor is particularly important here because it suggests that by right of origin (or some other unspecified divine conjuring), leisure-time properly belongs to subcultural practice – and television is stealing that time. Not surprisingly, they also happen to like subculture more as a possible site of political resistance: "we suspect that rootedness in a subculture that organizes the lived experience of a community usually provides a firmer basis for critique of the dominant than the deracinated consciousness promoted by the political economy and the culture of mass advertising" (1990: 180). Descriptively speaking, they may be right (though they also may not – as they say, we really don't know). But normatively speaking, we again find an insistence by left intellectuals that culture matters because it can be put to progressive political ends. The aesthetics are purely instrumental.

For Ben Franklin, time was money. For Budd, Entman, and Steinman (and Fiske too) leisure time is political capital. In a strange way, both the political economists and populists have thus mirrored the very capitalist logic they seek to criticize. Political economist Dallas Smythe (1994) used the phrase "all non-sleeping time is work time" to describe culture industries' orientations to their audiences. Audiences' attention to media texts could be "put to work" as broadcasters converted it into a product and sold advertising time. The same could be said for critics in cultural studies and political economy: insofar as we have an instrumental theory of cultural practice, we judge practices on the basis of whether they contribute to the project of social change or don't. Some of our biggest inter- and intradisciplinary fur-fights have been around the question of exactly how much and under what conditions cultural practices do contribute to social transformation. But there is a tacit agreement that they should.

Certainly, Fiske's forfeiture of any hope for significant social change in exchange for a very limited war-of-position will not do. But neither will Budd, Entman, and Steinman's zero-sum game. One reason that Americans watch so much TV is that it's easy to do after a long and draining day of work. Instead of criticizing the paucity of leisure time left over after the ever-extending workday (as Schor 1991 would later show, leisure time was in significant decline as Budd et. al wrote), Budd, Entman, and Steinman want to put their subjects right back to work for social change. Sure, that would be nice, but I suspect that many of their subjects are tired and drained, and not particularly in the mood to foment revolution in their sparse evening hours. Though Fiske has given up on significant political changes, he at least builds affect into his theory of culture: people watch TV or listen to music because it brings them pleasure. Given that so many people hate their jobs, we ought to take that seriously. To take it seriously, we need to treat "doing nothing" as a worthwhile practice in itself. We must let go of the idea that all cultural practices can or should be converted to politically productive labor. Otherwise, we are no better than ratings companies like Arbitron.

CONCLUSION

For all of cultural studies' inversions and critiques of traditional aesthetics, we have basically carried forward Matthew Arnold's "sweetness and light" program, where culture would be used to transform the philistine masses, replacing Arnold's hope for personal redemption with our hope that culture will lead the way to social transformation. For cultural studies, the burden of culture is to matter. "If it isn't political, then I don't give a damn!" Stuart Hall's polemic has become a kind of manifesto for the field. Not only *is* culture political, it *should be* political.

What if – for just a moment – we imagined that the decades-long project of validation of audiences and ordinary culture could be taken for granted? Perhaps they cannot; perhaps today there is a backlash against cultural studies' valorization of ordinary culture. But let's continue along this hypothetical line of reasoning for a moment. What if cultural studies actually "won" the "culture wars"? What would we do if we didn't have to demonstrate that cultural practices, texts, and audiences mattered politically? The quick answer, of course, is that we still have to deal with the question of *how* they matter, how they work. Many of the recent trends in the field, such as cultural policy studies, performativity as a theory of gender, the turn to Deleuze and Guattari, postcolonial theory, and so forth are precisely concerned with developing an account of the mechanics or physics of power via the analysis of culture. Cultural studies aims to explain, rather than explain away, the intrication of culture and power. But if you'll allow me a can of paint and an inordinately large brush, I believe these approaches still carry around a pink elephant they don't want to talk about: the normative assumption that culture should matter politically.

Should culture matter politically? To say that it does matter in our lived world seems utterly uncontroversial. But as I argued above, this instrumental theory of culture leaves something to be desired as a political and aesthetic program. In transforming all culture into political action, we are essentially putting our subjects to work. In our scholarship, at least, they perform the work of politics by other means. But I know of very few people who want to live in a world where their every action is considered instrumentally. This is not to say that such an analytic approach inaccurately describes the world as it is, only that it provokes the question of what should be. To put it another way, if we really believe in articulation, then it cannot be taken for granted that culture does matter in every circumstance, and there may in fact be circumstances in which it doesn't matter.

The reasons for our prescriptive ambiguity are simple enough to understand: cultural studies is still very much caught up in the project of validation. We validate cultural texts and practices as meaningful – if they cannot be given a generous formalist reading (though many in fact can), at least we can point to their political relevance. If audience members aren't political activists or explicitly criticizing dominant power relations, they're also not simply passive and stupid: people negotiate the texts they're given and make sense of their worlds in complex and contradictory ways. But in the process (and to offer another giant generalization), cultural studies has developed a distaste for making judgments. Perhaps this is because we rightly distrust the kinds of judgments made by our aesthetician predecessors, who excluded most of humanity from the domain of culture, properly conceived. But a theory of articulation should tell us that judgment in and of itself is not a dirty word: even aesthetic judgment can be articulated in new ways that differ markedly from more traditional aesthetics. Of course, like any articulation, it's not simply a matter of saying that it can be done. It would require a great deal of work on our part – but it is also an important next step.

An interesting corollary to cultural studies' own brand of political sweetness and light is the concurrent deemphasis of another notion of culture that might be equally useful under some analytical circumstances: culture as debasement. Culture is not just about building up, increasing, improving, striving. Culture can also be about ritual destruction, desacralization, and general mayhem. I don't mean to suggest Bakhtin's carnival, which is largely a functionalist concept, but rather a sense of culture as meaningless, nondirected activity that nonetheless uses human energy, effort, and creativity. It is not a choice between one or the other, but rather a belief that culture goes both ways. As cultural practice builds up, so it destroys. This need not be conceived as a zero-sum game or a form of stasis (one step forward, one step back). But just because a cultural practice lacks cultural studies' own particular brand of political goodness, truth, and beauty, does not necessarily make it less worthy of existence or a less essential part of human life (though I will grant that it might be less significant for a given political analysis). To put it another way, a humane society would allow for meaningless, nondirected activity that nonetheless uses human energy, effort and creativity. The alternative is to put our subjects to work day in and day out, which leaves them to a rather dim social fate.

If we fail to consciously engage with more programmatic concerns, then for all our self-congratulation at creating politicized scholarship, we will have accomplished only a reactive politics, one that can intervene only after the terms of the debate have been set. For all our reflexivity, we will be accepting pre-given political programs formed by others who dare to ask difficult questions about the difference between what is and what should be. As a loosely coherent field of scholarship, cultural studies' strengths have historically lay in its contextualism and its ability to look beyond texts to practices, and in turn to look beyond practices to their social and political horizons. The next step is to begin redescribing those horizons. As Raymond Williams (1961) put it, "the moral decline of socialism" – and to this we could today add feminism, antiracism, queer politics, postcolonial thought, environmentalism, and other left movements – "is in exact relation to its series of compromises with older images of society and to its failure to sustain and clarify the sense of an alternative human order."

Today, when cultural studies writers want to get polemical about politics, more often than not they get pragmatic: "all this utopian dreaming is not strategic; we need a political pragmatics!" This has authorized countless cultural studies in the past. But I want to make the opposite move: we cannot get pragmatic without doing a little dreaming. If you don't believe in social transformation then we have little to discuss – and frankly I have no idea why you'd want to do cultural studies. But if you believe that societies have radically changed over the past few centuries or eons, perhaps you believe they can change again. If this be the case, then it is worthwhile to think about what kind of world we should want to live in. Perhaps we should want a world in which people are not only free of the burdens of oppression, but where they are free of the burden of culture as well. Imagine how much better life would be if cultural practices did not need to be mapped on a grid using a political compass. Perhaps a better world would include a way of life where all nonsleeping time is *not* work time, whether that work is for sustenance, trade, or politics. I have no doubt that in our current cultural and political world, culture is very much a means to an end; it is very much politics by other means. But it should not always be so.

NOTES

1 Many thanks to Carrie Rentschler for her help and suggestions on this essay.

2 Granted, Thompson would not necessarily have been satisfied had Williams made use of a Gramscian vocabulary (and *certainly* not if he had used an Althusserian or other poststructuralist vocabulary – see Thompson 1995) to describe cultural politics. However, that Williams didn't do so is an enabling condition of Thompson's critique.

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Cultural Studies and Questions of Pleasure and Value

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This essay began as a response to the question, posed as the title of an MLA Convention session, "does cultural studies have bad taste?" In order to answer that question, I have to ask another: "why ask this question?" Perhaps the answer is obvious, but it is important to my argument to spell it out. We are asking this question because cultural studies as theory and practice seems to ignore, to reject, or, perhaps, to mishandle the very issues that since the rise of the New Criticism have seemed to be central to literary studies. It is the element of criticism known as judgment, central to aesthetic theory since Kant, which is apparently absent from cultural studies. As Simon Frith has argued, although popular culture is now the subject of much academic attention, "the aesthetics of the popular continues to be at best neglected and at worst dismissed" (1996: 11). Like the New Criticism, cultural studies has focused its efforts on interpretation, or close reading, of texts – a fact lamented by some practitioners more oriented toward the social sciences. It has not had much to say, however, about the quality or value of the objects it interprets. The question may imply that this lack of judgment results in poor judgment, the taking up of "bad" art. To decide this, of course, you would need to be able to answer persuasively questions of taste. In other words, you would have to offer something that heretofore has not existed, an aesthetics that can yield widespread agreement about critical judgments.

Now, to answer the original question in light of these considerations, we can't claim that cultural studies has bad taste since we can't agree on what bad taste is. What I think we can say is that cultural studies has an aversion to questions of taste. The aversion to such questions results from the desire to avoid reproducing