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Waiting for the Great Leap Forwards: Mixing Pop, Politics and Cultural Studies

Gilbert B. Rodman

INTRODUCTION

In early 1987, I was living in Philadelphia and still trying to figure out what I wanted to do with my life after college. I knew I wanted to do *something* related to popular music, but I didn't know much more than that. I had enjoyed my experiences as music editor for the campus newspaper and as a deejay for the campus radio station, so I was actively considering career options in both journalism and broadcasting. But I also knew that the world was filled with twenty-somethings who wanted to be professional rock critics and radio personalities, without there actually being lots of meaningful opportunities to make a living doing that sort of work.

So, like a lot of uncertain college graduates, I was also considering graduate school. As it happened, a friend of mine let me know that the US branch of the International Association for the Study of Popular Music (IASPM) was going to be holding its next conference in Pittsburgh that spring, and that

Larry Grossberg was scheduled to speak. My friend suggested that it might be worth my while to drive across the state, hear some papers, meet Larry and see whether that gave me a clearer sense of what I should do with my life. It was very smart advice and I've never regretted taking it.

At the time, though, I was pretty clueless about what I was getting myself into. I'd previously read – and enjoyed – *Is There Rock After Punk?* (Grossberg, 1986) but, as I came to realize when I re-read it a few years later, I hadn't understood most of it very well the first time through. When I met Larry in Pittsburgh and told him that I was thinking about graduate school, he asked me whether I was interested in doing cultural studies. I had never heard of such a thing before, but it sounded like it matched what I was looking for. Popular music was a type of culture, and I was interested in studying it, right? So, naively, I said, yes.

Eighteen months later, I was living in Champaign, Illinois, starting my doctoral

coursework, and enrolled in Larry's graduate seminar on cultural studies – which is where I learned that this thing called 'cultural studies' wasn't anything at all like what I had imagined it to be. Fortunately, my mistake wasn't costly, as cultural studies turned out to be even more interesting and exciting than what I had thought when Larry first asked me about it. More than a quarter of a century later, I still occasionally do research and teach classes on popular music, but it's no longer the clear center of my intellectual work. Cultural studies, on the other hand, is something that I've fully embraced – and even evangelized about (Rodman, 1997, 2010, 2013, 2015).

I start with this personal story as a way of illustrating the sort of accidental relationship that cultural studies has had to popular music studies over the years. Grossberg tells a comparable story (1997, pp. 22–29) about how his desire to explore the political power of rock led him to the University of Birmingham in 1969, where he had his own accidental, but life-changing, introduction to cultural studies. It is, in fact, arguably the same sort of unusual relationship that cultural studies has had with most of the major research objects that it has taken up over the years.

These sorts of happy accidents are common largely because, unlike traditional disciplines, cultural studies has no fixed central object of study, no dominant theoretical paradigm and no default research method of its own. To the extent that popular music (or anything else, for that matter) is a 'natural' fit for cultural studies, it is because it is a phenomenon – one among many – where significant cultural and political struggles manifest themselves. As Stuart Hall – one of the (some would say *The*) leading figures in British cultural studies – famously put it:

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, p. 239)

I've never encountered – in person or in print – anyone working on popular music within cultural studies who really doesn't give a damn about it. Most of us, after all, wound up coming to popular music as an object for academic study because we were *fans* – and fans with affective investments in music that were intense enough for us to enjoy spending large portions of our lives reading, thinking, analyzing, theorizing, writing and teaching about it. Nonetheless, Hall's claim about the political stakes of cultural studies' engagement with popular culture is crucial to understanding the various ways in which cultural studies practitioners have approached popular music over the past fifty years or so. We may all be fans, but that fandom is deeply connected to an awareness that popular music – and the various cultural formations around it – matters in the world as more than just a source of pleasure and entertainment. And, even then, cultural studies recognizes that there are significant political processes at work in those moments of allegedly 'pure' pleasure and entertainment. For cultural studies practitioners, politics is a necessary and central part of what we do, regardless of the actual research objects we take on. The intellectual questions that cultural studies asks are always driven by broader 'realworld' concerns of some sort.

With all this in mind, then, I want to tackle three specific tasks in the remainder of this chapter. Firstly, I will offer (and at least partially unpack) my own definition of cultural studies. Arguably, cultural studies is one of the most widely misunderstood forms of contemporary intellectual work. Lots of people (including many who claim the project as their own) *think* they know what cultural studies is – but are actually wrong. And so it's important to establish up front what cultural studies actually entails. Secondly, I will explain three major theoretical concepts that cultural studies has helped to introduce to the study of popular music: articulation, affect

and cultural formations. Thirdly, I will examine some of the most important contributions that cultural studies scholarship has made to three major subtopics within popular music studies: subcultures, active audiences and technology.

To be clear, this chapter will still – necessarily and unavoidably – produce an incomplete map of the terrain where cultural studies intersects with popular music. Partially, this is because of the incredible breadth and diversity of popular music studies. There is, after all, no one-size-fits-all approach to studying popular music – inside or outside of cultural studies – that can account for, say, the folk music revival of the 1950s, the DIY aesthetics of 1970s hip hop, the MTV boom of the 1980s, the Napster-fuelled file-sharing wars of the 2000s and so on. But mostly, the shortcomings of this map are the result of the incredible looseness of cultural studies as an intellectual project, especially when compared with traditional academic work. The nature of most disciplines, after all, is that they draw sharp boundaries around what can (and can't) be studied in their names. For instance, and as illustrated elsewhere in this *Handbook*, musicology focuses on the formal properties of musical texts and ethnomusicology on the lived cultures connected to specific musical practices, while historians of popular music tend to focus on questions of musical history (with sub-questions relating to different types of history: institutional, social, aesthetic and so on). When questions outside those parameters surface – for example, the political economy of the recorded music industry, the technological possibilities enabled by digital samplers – traditional disciplinary scholars generally push them to the margins of their projects.

As an aggressively inter- (some would even say anti-) disciplinary project, however, cultural studies has no such well-defined borders. This, in turn, makes it much harder to pin down the limits – be those theoretical, methodological or object-oriented – of cultural studies' engagement with popular music as a subject. A specific cultural studies project on

popular music is likely to draw on theories, methodologies and previous research from an eclectic and wide-ranging span of disciplines. As such, the full scope of cultural studies' overall engagement with popular music is too broad and diverse to sum up neatly in a single chapter. Nonetheless, the theoretical concepts and research subtopics which I focus here should help to provide a strong sense of what makes a cultural studies approach to popular music both distinctive and valuable.

DEFINITION

There's an old 'quote' – one that's been (mis)attributed to dozens of different people – which claims that writing about music is like dancing about architecture. I'm tempted to say that 'defining cultural studies' could just as easily (though not quite as poetically) be slotted into that range of awkward, ungainly practices. Over the years, of course, many people have tried to define cultural studies – some much more gracefully than others (Hall, 1990, 1992; Bérubé, 1994; Storey, 1996; Felski, 2005; Grossberg, 1997, 2010; Morris, 1997; Striplas, 1998; Turner, 2012) – but it's still quite common (and ordinary) for even experienced readers to come away from such efforts scratching their heads in befuddlement. Like music, cultural studies is difficult – if not impossible – to represent effectively in words. If there's a common thread running through such definitional efforts, it's that cultural studies is (and should be) too variable, too open-ended, too context-dependent to be defined with any real precision.

Drawing on Hall's claim (1992, p. 281) that the good cultural studies practitioner needs both to know more than 'the other side' *and* to communicate that knowledge effectively with a broader public, I define cultural studies as:

... an interlocking set of leftist intellectual and political practices. Its central purpose is twofold: (1) to produce detailed, contextualized analyses of the ways that power and social relations are

created, structured, and maintained through culture, and (2) to circulate those analyses in public forums suitable to the tasks of pedagogy, provocation, and political intervention. (Rodman, 2013, p. 344)

A fully detailed explanation of the multiple pieces of this definition is beyond the scope of the present essay (though see Chapter 2 of Rodman, 2015), but I want to briefly discuss four key aspects of it here.

First, while cultural studies is widely understood to be an academic endeavor of some sort – if not necessarily a field or discipline of its own (though some people claim that it has achieved this status), then at least a major disciplinary sub-specialty – it is actually *not* necessarily a creature of the university at all. The intellectual component of its longstanding efforts to blend intellectual and political work has made the university a common site for cultural studies to use as an institutional base, but it is still possible – and even desirable – for cultural studies to be practised by people other than professional scholars and in places other than institutions of higher education. While I focus here primarily on academic forms of cultural studies, it is important to note that there are important examples of ‘popular’ (i.e. non-academic) popular music criticism that can (and should) be recognized as legitimate examples of cultural studies (see, for example, Willis, 1981, 2011; Marcus, 1989).

Second, insofar as cultural studies takes on academic forms, it is a highly (and even radically) interdisciplinary project. Its scholarly engagements with popular music (or anything else, for that matter) have come from all across the humanities and the social sciences, and those engagements have themselves been characterized by a wilful disregard for disciplinary boundaries with respect to their chosen theoretical frameworks, research methodologies and citations of relevant literature.

Third, cultural studies is a *radically* contextual form of intellectual and political work. Any specific cultural studies research project thus involves two major tasks: (1) to map out the range of existing relationships between the study’s primary object and the world around

it, and (2) to make subjective choices about which of those relationships provides the most productive understanding of the research object in question. And it is the latter task that makes cultural studies’ brand of contextualism inherently radical, as it requires us to actively invent the context that we are analyzing, not simply to accept it as a predetermined and self-evident set of delimiting parameters. As Larry Grossberg describes it:

Context is not merely background but the very conditions of possibility for something. ... The context of a particular research is not empirically given beforehand; it has to be defined by the project, by the political question that is at stake. The context can be as narrow as a neighborhood at a particular moment, or an urban region, or perhaps even some local high school that is having race problems, or it can be as broad as global capitalism after the cold war. To put it succinctly, for cultural studies, context is everything and everything is contextual. ... To put it another way, the very questions cultural studies asks – its problematics – potentially change in every study. The problematic of one cultural studies investigation is not the same as that of another. (1995, pp. 12–13)

Put a slightly different way, the cultural studies practitioner understands that the same historical facts can be used to create very different stories depending on the context(s) in which the scholar chooses to place those facts – and that the range of legitimate contexts available for the scholar to choose from can be extensive. For example, as I have argued elsewhere:

We can tell very different versions of ‘the same’ story – i.e., the tale of Elvis’ rise to national prominence in 1956 – depending on which historical facts we decide to use in framing and supporting our narrative ... If we’re especially concerned with the racial politics of the rise of rock ‘n’ roll, then it might be especially important for us to pay attention to who originally wrote and recorded the various songs on which Elvis built his career, how faithful his versions of those songs were to the spirit of the originals, what the racial demographics of the audiences who bought those records were, who did and didn’t receive royalty payments on sales of those records, whether Elvis’ success helped boost the popularity of the black artists whose

music he performed, and so on. On the other hand, if we're more interested in the rise of youth culture that rock 'n' roll helped to bring about, then we're more likely to ask questions about the age of Elvis' audiences, how links were forged between rock 'n' roll and other youth-friendly aspects of the leisure and entertainment industries (e.g., soda shops, drive-ins, etc.), the rise in disposable income among post-war teens, and so on. Neither of these sets of historical questions is somehow 'wrong', but each will nevertheless put a very different spin on the story that results. (Rodman, 1999, p. 41)

Fourth, and finally, cultural studies recognizes that the cultural terrain is shaped by hierarchical structures of power (for example, forces that mark specific populations and identities as marginal, deviant, dangerous) *and* that it is a crucial site where people struggle against those forces in an effort to produce a more egalitarian social order and a more just world. Thus, cultural studies is inherently and necessarily *political*, with a particular emphasis on questions of *cultural* politics – for example, the politics of texts, the politics of institutions, the politics of audiences and communities. Again, Grossberg illustrates this facet of cultural studies (along with its radical contextualism) nicely:

I started the work that became *We Gotta ...* [Grossberg, 1992] as an undergraduate, in the 1960s. I wanted to figure out why the music was so important, and what its place was, how it helped to construct a particular political context, and how it helped to give shape to particular practices of resistance that both succeeded and failed. ... So, yes, I wrote about popular music, but the point of me writing about popular music was not, strictly speaking, to explain popular music. In *We Gotta ...* I was interested in what we might today call the 'virtual' – a potentiality, a politics of rock and roll that was just as easily taken up [by] and articulated to the political Right as it was to the Left. (2013, p. 74)

ARTICULATION

Articulation is the process by which otherwise unrelated phenomena – practices, beliefs, texts, social groups – come to be

linked together in a *seemingly* natural way. The term itself derives from British English and is perhaps most easily explained using the analogy of a tractor-trailer truck, which the British refer to as:

... 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 conditions. It is a linkage which is not necessary, determined, absolute and essential for all time. (Hall, 1986, p. 53)

As a theoretical concept, articulation is vital to cultural studies' understanding of how the social order comes to have the shape it does and how that shape changes over time. Put a different way, we can understand articulation as cultural studies' route around the analytical roadblocks thrown up by essentialist understandings of how the world works. Essentialism claims that the existing relationships between a variety of phenomena – for example, people's gender and their cognitive abilities, words and their meanings, collective identities and political beliefs – are entirely natural – that is, they exist as a reflection of some necessary and immutable truth that lies at the core of the phenomenon in question. So, for example, an essentialist view of gender insists that to be a woman is to have a natural desire/need/skill for mothering. An essentialist view of class insists that to be working class is to have a natural connection to progressive, leftist, and/or radical politics. An essentialist view of language insists that words have fixed, unwavering meanings. And so on.

The trouble with such claims is that none of those relationships work anywhere near that neatly. To be sure, there *are* strong connections to be found in the world, connections that *appear to be* so stable as to be natural and/or guaranteed for all time. The key words here, though, are 'appear to be', as even the most solid-seeming of such connections can be broken, altered

and/or reformed. What articulation provides is a model of *how* those linkages come about that recognizes three major things: (1) that work has to be done to create those linkages in the first place; (2) that work has to be done to maintain those linkages over time; and (3) that those linkages *can* be undone (though, of course, not without enough work taking place to overcome the other work being done to maintain those linkages). As such, cultural studies recognizes that a whole host of things that matter to the analysis of popular music – for example, how meaning is produced, how identities are constructed and maintained, how particular hierarchies of power are maintained through culture – are fundamentally *unstable* processes.

In this sense, articulation helps to free cultural studies from an analytical ‘trap’ that many a scholar has fallen into: for example, the notion that a song means something very specific and verifiable, and that its meaning can be revealed through a careful, systematic analysis of the text of that song. To be clear, articulation does *not* tell us that textual analysis is worthless. Quite the contrary: it recognizes that meaning is produced in the world through various sets of codes and practices and it believes that careful, systematic analysis can help to reveal important aspects of those processes. What articulation enables is the understanding that those codes are historical, rather than essential, phenomena – and that whatever stability and reliability they may have at any given moment is the function of ongoing historical efforts to keep those codes in place. Put a different way, even the most ‘natural’ relationship can, under the right circumstances, be broken and remade in new ways to form new relationships.

For cultural studies, then, the practice of analysis *doesn't* revolve around efforts to reveal and/or explain the ‘true’ meaning of a musical text, practice or event. The cultural studies practitioner, after all, doesn't believe that such a singular meaning exists in the first place. Instead, they attempt to explain how the phenomena in question come to have particular meanings in particular contexts: a

subtle, yet crucial, distinction. In this form of analysis, meaning only exists insofar as it is *articulated* – that is, it results from the intersections of particular texts (objects, events, etc.) with particular people (audiences, artists, industry executives, policy-makers, etc.) and practices (fashions, slang, lifestyles, etc.) in particular contexts (social, cultural, economic, political, historical, national, etc.).

Therefore, cultural studies has rarely approached popular music merely as music. This is not because those who adopt cultural studies approaches are uninterested in what's going on in musical texts, but because they are much more interested in the social, cultural and political work that popular music does in the world. The latter, of course, isn't a completely separate question from the former, but it's also not reducible to the former. The cultural politics of any given musical phenomenon aren't necessarily explainable through some sort of meticulous ‘close reading’ of the relevant musical texts, as much as they are a product of the various articulations between the music and a host of other phenomena.

AFFECT

As a concept, affect is complicated enough to be worthy of a chapter or even a book (Gregg and Seigworth, 2010) unto itself. For our purposes here, however, we can understand affect in two ways: (1) as a phenomenon that exceeds signification (for example, how music feels, rather than what music means); and (2) as a way to explain how (and how much) particular music matters to the lives of its fans (for example, that fans invest time, money, energy, emotion and identity into ‘their’ music in ways that often exceed the sort of investments that fans make in other forms of popular culture).

One of the major reasons for the affective turn in cultural studies was the recognition that a large number of things that mattered to the project – for example, questions of

political engagement, cultural investment, social relations and so on – could not be fully accounted for simply by analyzing what texts meant (semiotics) or what people believed (ideology). This is not purely an issue related to popular music, of course, but music is arguably a phenomenon where such gaps are the most visible.

For example, the overt messages of political resistance found in a lot of reggae music have not generally signalled anything at all about the political beliefs – much less the level of political engagement or activism – of the music's fans outside of the Caribbean diasporic communities. Especially in the US, the appeal of reggae to successive generations of largely white, largely middle-class college students has been more about its use as a form of marijuana-flavored party music than as a genre filled with protest songs railing against the evils of racism, colonialism and global capitalism and here we can see articulation at work once more, insofar as the connections between the music and a particular lifestyle are rooted in a particular set of historical circumstances, rather than being a simple or direct reflection of some essential 'truth' at the music's core.

With respect to the study of popular music, then, the affective turn that cultural studies helped to bring about was productive in at least two respects. First, it helped to get at the many important ways in which music functions for listeners that have nothing to do with semiotics and/or ideology (at least not in any direct or conventional senses of the concepts). Put simply, popular music often engages the body before it has a chance to engage the mind – you hear a new song for the first time, and your hips start to move before a single lyric has been sung ... or even before you have the opportunity to reflect on what the song might be about. This is an affective response and it is neither equivalent nor reducible to the 'meaning' of the music. At one level this seems to be an obvious claim – *of course*, people respond to music in emotional and/or embodied ways – and yet it somehow remains a surprisingly under-examined aspect of how music works.

Perhaps because writing about music really *is* like dancing about architecture, people (academics and otherwise) often devote much more energy trying to explain what a given song means than they do trying to explain how it makes people feel.

Second, and in ways that are especially important for thinking about the cultural politics of music, affect helps to get at the gap that often exists between people's beliefs (on the one hand) and their willingness/ability to *act* on those beliefs (on the other). As Grossberg (1992) notes, one of the major shifts that took place between the 1960s/1970s and the 1980s/1990s with respect to popular music is that the youth in the latter period invested far more time and money on music than the youth ever did in the former period – and yet music actually mattered *less* to that later generation than it had to the earlier one. Put a different way, a rock fan circa 1972 was more likely to understand their fandom as something that shaped their identity in crucial ways, as a sign of a particular kind of anti-establishment politics and as a marker of their willingness to put those politics into action somehow. A rock fan circa 1992, on the other hand, in spite of the fact that they devoted more of their waking hours – and their disposable income – to the music, was far less likely to 'translate' their fandom into any significant political activity or commitment.

A useful way to think about these two aspects of affect is to conceive of it as a vector – a phenomenon that has both a qualitative and a quantitative dimension to it. At the qualitative level, music can evoke a wide range of moods, feelings, emotions, memories and physical responses (for example, anger, sorrow, arousal, grief, joy, relaxation, the need to dance, frantic efforts at air guitar) which *aren't* the equivalent of semantic meanings. A guitar solo doesn't mean 'rage' (or 'strength', or 'love', etc.) in the same way that the word 'dog' means a four-legged mammal that chases sticks and begs for table scraps. At the quantitative level, the various emotional and bodily responses that I just mentioned can – and do – operate at different levels of intensity

(for example, some music-induced types of exuberance are more frantic than others).

The very notion of fandom, then, can be explained using these two aspects of affect. Compared to other members of the listening audience, fans not only have a different kind of qualitative response to the music in question (for example, it's something they love, rather than something that they merely like or tolerate, or that they find annoying or boring), but they have a much more intense investment (a quantitatively larger investment) in the music than other listeners do. In particular, fans often use 'their' music (and it is significant that they feel a kind of ownership over it) as a major axis around which they construct their own sense of identity. As Simon Frith describes it:

In 'possessing' music, we make it part of our own identity and build it into our sense of ourselves. To write pop criticism is ... to attract hate mail; mail not so much defending the performer or performance criticized as defending the letter writer: criticize a star and the fans respond as if you have criticized them. The biggest mail bag I ever received was after I had been critical of Phil Collins. Hundreds of letters arrived (not from teenyboppers or gauche adolescents, but from young professionals) typed neatly on headed notepaper, all based on the assumption that in describing Collins as ugly, Genesis as dull, I was deriding their way of life, undermining their identity. The intensity of this relationship between taste and self-definition seems peculiar to popular music – it is 'possessable' in ways that other cultural forms (except, perhaps, sports teams) are not. (1987, pp. 143–144)

CULTURAL FORMATIONS

A lot of early academic work on popular music tried to make sense of it as a self-contained phenomenon of some sort. Scholars would ask questions about what was going on 'inside' specific musical texts that could help to explain the social, cultural and/or political work that music was doing in the world. Or they would try to pin down the meanings of specific genres, in the recognition that (for example) rock writ large may do political

work in the world that can't be understood by looking at individual songs or albums (or even artists).

Part of what cultural studies scholars came to recognize about this latter move, however, was that much of the work ostensibly done by specific musical genres is still happening somewhere 'outside' of musical texts of any sort. It involves things like fashion, or slang, or drugs, or ways of occupying public space, or particular social relations – that is, things that matter a great deal, and that are clearly articulated to music in some way, but that can't easily be located anywhere 'inside' musical texts or practices. In ways that draw on both articulation and affect, then, a cultural formation is defined by the ways that:

a set of practices comes to congeal and, for a certain period of time, take on an identity of its own which is capable of existing in different social and cultural contexts. Unlike notions of genre, which assume that such identities depend on the existence of necessary formal elements, a formation is a historical articulation, an accumulation or organization of practices ... To account for the emergence of the formation, one must look elsewhere, to the context, the dispersed but structured field of practices in which the specific articulation was accomplished and across which it is sustained over time and space. It is not a question of interpreting a body of texts or tracing out their intertextuality. Rather, the formation has to be read as the articulation of a number of discrete series of events, only some of which are discursive. (Grossberg, 1992, pp. 69–70)

For instance, one of the ways in which 'real' fans – of a variety of musical styles, from swing to punk, from rock to hip hop – distinguish themselves from 'inauthentic' fans of various sorts (for example, 'day trippers', 'weekend punks', and the like) is to insist that *real* fans embrace the cultural formation surrounding the music much more fully than all those posers do. As such, it's often the *non*-musical elements of the cultural formation that matter the most. 'Real' fans, the argument goes, invest in more than just the music: they buy into the way of life that has been articulated to the music by other fans.

Along similar lines, the notion of cultural formation helps cultural studies get at the various impacts – aesthetic, cultural, economic, social, political and otherwise – that musical phenomena often have that cannot adequately be explained simply by analyzing the texts and/or performances in question. For example, rock critic Tom Smucker once summed up the cultural changes that Elvis Presley helped to bring about in the US in the 1950s by describing him as ‘the man whose TV appearance inspires my brother to wear *blue jeans to church*’ (1979, p. 162). As I argue at more length elsewhere (Rodman, 1996, pp. 158–169), what Smucker’s seemingly trivial anecdote reveals are some of the early, powerful articulations of rock ‘n’ roll to a much broader set of cultural values and practices: more specifically, values and practices that would eventually give rise to a more cohesive (if ever-shifting and impermanent) cultural formation around rock a decade or so later.

YOUTH SUBCULTURES

Arguably, the earliest sustained cultural studies work on popular music came out of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham in the 1970s, and focused on British working-class youth subcultures – for example, teddy boys, mods, rockers, skinheads, punks – that involved strong affective investments in particular musical styles. Much of this work pushed back in significant and insightful ways against dominant cultural narratives that framed both the working classes in general and these subcultures in particular as sites for considerable anxiety about the post-war social order.

Deep into the 1960s, traditional British institutions – academic and otherwise – generally treated working class life as a phenomenon on the margins of British culture. At best, the working-classes were viewed with a sort of patronizing romanticism (for

example, as ‘simpler folk’). At worst, they were seen to be an ongoing source of problems for British society (for example, as uneducated masses whose unrefined tastes dragged the rest of British culture down). One of the major thrusts of early cultural studies pioneers such as Richard Hoggart (1957) and Raymond Williams (1958/1989) was to treat working-class life as a worthy focal point in and of itself for serious, respectful scholarship and criticism – that is, to treat working-class culture *as* culture, rather than as something external to (and problematic for) ‘real’ culture.

With respect to the various youth subcultures that grew out of the British working classes from the 1950s through the 1970s, dominant sociological analysis (as well as mainstream media commentaries: see Cohen, 1987) largely understood these youth as deviant and even dangerous: a powerful symbol for everything that had (allegedly) gone wrong with Britain since the end of the war, especially insofar as many of the visible trappings of those subcultures (for example, rock ‘n’ roll, drape jackets and crepe-soled shoes for Teddy boys, or blue jeans and leather jackets for rockers) represented the ‘Americanization’ (and thus the dissolution) of British culture. Many of the cultural studies scholars who took up the question of youth subcultures, on the other hand, came from backgrounds that were not so far removed from those of the youths in question, and they were building on the intellectual foundations laid down by the likes of Hoggart and Williams. As such, cultural studies was inclined to examine subcultures from a ‘sympathetic’ (though not entirely uncritical) perspective, and it asked very different types of questions about these youths than the ones posed by more traditional critics. While mainstream sociologists and news commentators wondered about the (alleged) threats that subcultures posed to British society, cultural studies scholars were more concerned with theorizing how the youths in question made sense of their own subcultural styles and practices. Why did they prefer *this* genre

of music (or sense of fashion) to *that* one? What were the micro-politics behind such choices? What struggles, tensions, and contradictions in the larger culture were being worked out on the surfaces of these youth's daily lives? And so on.

Significantly, most of the subcultural research had very little (if anything) to say about the music itself, even as it routinely pointed to the centrality of music to the lives of the youths who were part of the subcultures in question. For instance, the two most significant books on subcultures to come out of the CCCS – *Resistance Through Rituals* (Hall and Jefferson, 1976) and *Subculture* (Hebdige, 1979) – offered keen insights into the cultural politics of subcultural fashion choices, the class and race based politics that helped to shape subcultural values, the influence of reggae (as a cultural formation) on punk aesthetics and politics, and so on. In particular, these books argued that the politics of style that played out across the visible surfaces of these subcultures – especially, though not exclusively, the provocative choices these groups made in how they dressed and how they occupied public spaces – were an imaginary (i.e. ideological) attempt to work through various social, cultural and political contradictions in post-war British working-class culture. As important as such insights were – especially in contrast to the simple demonization of subcultures that passed for ‘analysis’ in mainstream media discourse – one would be hard-pressed to come away from either of these volumes with any clear sense of what the various musical genres in question (for example, 1950s rock ‘n’ roll, Northern Soul, punk) actually sounded like.

For all its strengths and influence, then, this early scholarship had a number of significant blind spots. In particular, as feminist cultural studies scholars pointed out (McRobbie and Garber, 1976; McRobbie, 1980), most of the CCCS's work on subcultures failed to acknowledge two crucial facts: (1) that there were, in fact, girls and young women actively involved in these subcultures; and (2) that ‘the street’ (i.e. the major

site where these youths were understood to perform their public displays of subcultural style) is a public space that is not equally accessible to boys/men and girls/women. As such, the early subcultural work, for all of its insights, still left out huge and vital parts of those subcultures, insofar as it focused primarily on spaces/contexts where male members of the subculture were visible, without ever wondering where the girls/women were or what their subcultural activities, styles and/or politics entailed.

ACTIVE AUDIENCES

In 1973, Stuart Hall presented a lecture called ‘Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse’ (an edited version was published several years later as ‘Encoding/Decoding’ (1980)) that proved to be extraordinarily influential for media studies as a whole. Summed up briefly, Hall's essay is an attempt to critique the ‘low-flying behaviourism’ (1980, p. 131) that characterized the then-dominant school of thought around ‘media effects’. Whereas the prevailing theoretical models assumed that media messages performed various kinds of work upon (mostly) passive, unwitting audiences (for example, increasing their knowledge, shaping their opinions, changing their behaviour), Hall argued that television audiences played a vital and active role in creating the meaning(s) of any given televisual text. According to his model, the processes of ‘decoding’ that take place among television audiences are at least as important as the processes of ‘encoding’ undertaken by television producers and networks. More crucially, Hall argued that the question of decoding can't simply be reduced to an inverted form of the encoding process: the significance of the meanings produced by audiences cannot adequately be explained by analyzing whether their decodings ‘correctly’ match the intended meanings of the texts' producers.

Hall's original model was built around the assumption that television was the medium under analysis, but this didn't prevent his insights from being taken up and applied to a broad range of media phenomena, including popular music. As Hall would note several years later (1994), one of the problems with the range of ways in which the encoding/decoding model was applied is that it was never intended (much less designed) to serve as a general theory of media, and that some of its fundamental assumptions (especially on the encoding side of things) don't always fit non-televisual media very well. Again, the full range of cultural-studies influenced 'active audience' research on popular music is too far beyond the scope of this chapter to summarize neatly. But one of the most prominent – and representative – examples of such work is an eclectic body of scholarship from the late 1980s and early 1990s that came to be known (informally, albeit not always respectfully) as 'Madonna studies'.

Madonna studies itself took a variety of forms (and not all of these necessarily counted as cultural studies), but underlying most of this work was the notion that any proper understanding of Madonna's cultural significance required scholars to pay careful – and respectful – attention to the accounts offered by her fans for how and why she mattered so much to them (Fiske, 1987; Frank and Smith, 1993; Schwichtenberg, 1993; Sexton, 1993). Rejecting more cynical (and, significantly, patronizingly patriarchal) understandings of fans as ignorant masses who had been tricked by the culture industry into believing that formulaic pap counted as art (a major line of thinking about popular music that dates back to the Frankfurt School (Adorno, 1941/1990; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1944/2006)), Madonna studies scholars instead saw her fans – especially the teenage girls who were the ostensible core of her audience during the earliest years of her career – as actively engaged, politically savvy cultural agents in their own right. This scholarship wasn't interested in what Madonna (or her music) allegedly did *to* her fans as much

as it focused on what Madonna's fans did *with* her music, videos and style – and how such practices empowered these fans in ways that challenged dominant, patriarchal cultural narratives about how girls and young women were 'supposed' to behave.

At its best, Madonna studies (and comparable 'active audience' research on popular music and other media forms) offered a much-needed corrective to simplistic models of how media and culture function. It *does* matter, after all, what real people do with various media texts and practices in the contexts of their daily lives and many of those practices are self-conscious efforts to resist – and even reject – oppressive world views promoted by mainstream media discourses. To pretend that the cultural impact of popular music can be fully comprehended merely by analyzing media texts (songs, albums, videos) or media industry practices is to ignore the significant forms of agency exerted by ordinary people in their daily lives.

At the same time, however, the flood of 'active audience' research that appeared in the late 1980s and early 1990s arguably came to take on a simplistic orthodoxy of its own that was every bit as problematic as the previous 'media effects' orthodoxies that it had so successfully challenged. It is extraordinarily rare, after all for any media text to simply impose its creators' will on unwitting audiences so fully as to squelch *all* resistant readings and creative reappropriations – and so it is relatively easy to look at mainstream media phenomena that promote normative, hegemonic values, and then to find examples of audiences reading those texts 'against the grain' in ways that can plausibly be interpreted as 'resistance'. As such, even as the notion of 'active audiences' started to gain traction in media studies, some cultural studies scholars (for example, Morris, 1990; Williamson, 1986) expressed concerns about how often such scholarship overstates the degree to which tiny acts of micro-resistance actually represent effective or meaningful challenges to the larger social order.

TECHNOLOGY

One of the longest running debates (scholarly and otherwise) with respect to the cultural politics of popular music revolves around the relationship between various technologies for producing, amplifying and/or recording music (on the one hand) and the aesthetic values and qualities of the music involved (on the other). One side of these debates maintains that technology – digital sampling, synthesizers, electric guitars, recording studios, electronic microphones, player pianos – serves as a problematic sort of crutch that allows people without ‘real’ talent to make inferior (albeit often very popular) music. At the other end of the spectrum, new technologies are heralded as a powerful agent for the democratization of cultural production: a means by which culturally disenfranchised segments of the population (i.e., people with limited or no access to formal musical training, elite cultural institutions, and/or the global distribution platforms of major media conglomerates) can become active, creative participants in the broader culture.

Where cultural studies enters this debate is largely through a set of analyses and arguments that do two things: (1) offer a powerful critique of technological determinism, and (2) argue that public anxieties around new technologies (especially, though not exclusively, media technologies) are often more about pre-existing tensions within the culture than they are about the technologies themselves. Some of the most important non-musical examples of these interventions include Raymond Williams on television (1974), James Carey on the telegraph (1983/1989), Carolyn Marvin on the telephone (1988), and Jennifer Slack and Greg Wise’s textbook on technological culture (2005). In its own way, each of these projects argues that there is no necessary, predetermined set of effects connected to any given technology – that is, that the various social and cultural changes associated with the spread of a new technology are the result of

historically specific articulations, rather than the reflection of some essential ‘truth’ at the core of that technology.

This, then, is the broader intellectual context in which cultural studies scholars approaching the question of music-related technologies have shaped their own analyses. For example, Andrew Goodwin (1988) intervenes in the debates around the aesthetics and politics of digital sampling and music-making, especially insofar as those debates hinge on the notion of ‘authenticity’. On the one hand, Goodwin rejects claims arising out of postmodern theory (and seemingly supported by the popularity of music by the likes of M/A/R/R/S and the Pet Shop Boys) that the author was dead and that pastiche ruled the day, since there were still far too many fans and critics complaining about how ‘cold’, ‘fake’ and ‘soulless’ digital music was for such claims to hold up well. At the same time, however, Goodwin is equally sceptical of traditionalist arguments about the ‘inauthenticity’ of the music in question, noting that what counts as ‘authentic’ or ‘real’ when it comes to musical technology is an ever-moving target, rather than a stable reflection of some sort of eternal aesthetic truth. As is often the case with cultural studies analyses, Goodwin recognizes that the cultural terrain in question is changing in significant ways, but that these changes are a complicated mix of what Raymond Williams refers to as ‘dominant, residual, and emergent’ cultural forces (1977, pp. 121–127).

Tricia Rose’s groundbreaking book on the cultural politics of hip hop, *Black Noise* (1994), isn’t exclusively – or even primarily – about technology. Some of her more important arguments, however, revolve around the creative ways in which early rap acts (for example, P.M. Dawn, Public Enemy, Stetsasonic) used – or, in some cases, deliberately ‘misused’ – various musical technologies (turntables, digital samplers, drum machines, recording studios). In the studio, for instance, many rap producers deliberately worked ‘in the red’: they set recording levels that exceeded traditional production norms used to create a ‘clean’ sound, precisely

because they were *trying* to give their music a ‘noisy’, ‘distorted’ feel ... and it is significant that the most readily available terms to describe these musicians’ affective goals carry non-musical connotations (for example, ‘that’s not music, that’s just noise’). Part of Rose’s larger argument, after all, is that hip hop artists were working within African American aesthetics, and thus drawing on a long history of subverting Euro-centric musical norms (for example, the ‘bent’ notes of jazz and blues) in ways that ultimately serve to reshape the very parameters of what the dominant culture recognizes to be ‘music’.

Jonathan Sterne’s *The Audible Past* (2003) offers a richly detailed historical account of early aural technologies – the stethoscope, the telephone, the phonograph – and how the cultural and professional discourses around those technologies helped to reshape the ways in which people hear. The very act of hearing, Sterne reminds us, is always already a culturally specific phenomenon, insofar as we all learn to listen to the world selectively: filtering out ‘background noise’ from ‘meaningful’ sounds in ways that are far more historically determined than natural. With respect to music, Sterne examines the ways that early sound recordings were framed and widely understood as so incredibly lifelike as to be indistinguishable from the real thing. In particular, Sterne points to RCA Victor’s iconic His Master’s Voice trademark – an image of a dog listening to a gramophone, ostensibly fooled into believing that the sound coming out of the horn is the actual voice of his (dead) master – as an example of the efforts to retrain the ears of modern listeners to hear recordings filled with a steady stream of cracks, pops, and hisses (i.e., a barrage of low fidelity noise by today’s standards) as the very pinnacle of ‘perfect’ sound reproduction.

CONCLUSION

The projects described above are far from an exhaustive survey of the multitudes of ways in

which cultural studies practitioners have approached popular music over the past several decades. I could potentially have doubled the length of this chapter while still feeling that a significant amount of work in ‘cultural studies and popular music’ hadn’t been represented properly. As such, I have said less than would be ideal about cultural studies scholarship on popular music and race (for example, Neal, 1999, 2002; Lipsitz, 1990, 1994, 2007; Ross and Rose, 1994; Boyd, 1997, 2003; Gray, 2005; Rodman, 2006; Forman and Neal, 2012), gender (for example, Frith and McRobbie, 1978/79; McRobbie, 1989; McClary 1990; Whiteley, 1997; Coates, 1998, 2007; Brooks and Wald, 2009; Paredez, 2009), or intellectual property (for example, McLeod, 2001, 2005; Rodman and Vanderdonck, 2006; McLeod and DiCola, 2011) – to name just a few other topics.

Popular music has been a significant and recurring site for cultural studies scholarship since at least the early 1970s but, as suggested in the introduction to this chapter, its importance to cultural studies has always been about the ways it has been articulated to other sites of cultural, social, and political struggle. Much of the cultural studies scholarship on popular music, then, could just as plausibly be read as being about other topics entirely – for example, race, gender, youth, intellectual property, media, pedagogy, technology – a fact that attests to the lasting significance of popular music to the full range of human experience, and its recurring role in ordinary people’s struggles to make the world a better place.

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