

12 The vernacular economist's guide to media and culture

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1 It's best to begin by clearing our minds of (c)(K)ant. Rather than being two
2 distinct sectors, the economy has always been sodden with media and culture, and
3 *vice versa*. For culture derives from the Latin word "colare," which implies tending
4 and developing agriculture. With the emergence of capitalism, culture came to
5 *personify* instrumentalism, at the same time as negating it. On the one hand, there
6 was the industrialization of agriculture; on the other, the tutoring of individual
7 taste. German, French, and Spanish dictionaries of the eighteenth century testify
8 to a movement of the word "culture" in the direction of spiritual cultivation as well
9 as animal husbandry. And with the spread of literacy and publishing; the advent of
10 customs and laws that were administered and understood through the printed word;
11 and the peripatetic demography occasioned by capital's urbanization, cultural texts
12 supplemented and supplanted physical force as sources of authority. When the
13 Industrial Revolution moved populations to cities, food came to be imported, and
14 new textual forms were exchanged for both practical and entertainment purposes.
15 Along came a society of consumers, and an art world. There was a corollary in
16 labor terms: *poligrafi* in fifteenth century Venice and hacks in eighteenth century
17 London emerged, penning popular books about correct conduct – instructions on
18 daily life. Thus began a division of cultural labor in the modern sense (Benhabib,
19 2002; de Predo, 1991 and 1999; Briggs and Burke, 2002).

20 Culture has usually been understood in two separate registers, via the social
21 sciences and the humanities – truth versus beauty. It has been a marker of
22 differences and similarities in taste and status. In the humanities, cultural texts
23 were judged by criteria of quality, as practiced critically and historically. For
24 their part, the social sciences focused on the religions, customs, times, and spaces
25 of different groups, as explored ethnographically or statistically. So whereas the
26 humanities articulated differences *within* populations, through *symbolic* norms
27 (for example, which class had the cultural capital to appreciate high culture, and
28 which did not) the social sciences articulated differences *between* populations,
29 through *social* norms (for example, which people cultivated agriculture in keeping
30 with spirituality, and which did not) (Wallerstein, 1989). This fed into the
31 Cartesian dualism separating thought from work, which held that "the intelligent
32 and the corporeal nature are distinct" (Descartes, 1977, 34). David Hume, for
33 example, referred to two philosophies of "human nature": one focused on life

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1 “born as action,” the other “a reasonable rather than an active being” (1955, 15).
2 This binary has played out in the study of culture through an opposition drawn
3 between society and economy versus audience and meaning.

4 But even 80 years ago, Thorstein Veblen referred to US universities as
5 “competitors for traffic in merchantable instruction,” and he recognized the
6 importance of the “industrial arts,” i.e. knowledge/culture bracketed in a way
7 that compromised this dualism (quoted in Pietrykowski, 2001, 299 and Schiller
8 1996, 162). And the canons of judgment and analysis that once flowed from
9 the humanities-social-sciences bifurcation over approaches to culture (and kept
10 aesthetic tropes somewhat distinct from social norms) have collapsed in on each
11 other. Art and custom have become resources for markets and nations (Yúdice
12 2002, 40) – reactions to the crisis of belonging, and to economic necessity. As a
13 consequence, culture is more than textual signs or everyday practices (Martín-
14 Barbero, 2003, 40). It is also crucial to both advanced and developing economies,
15 and provides the legitimizing ground on which particular groups (e.g., African
16 Americans, gays and lesbians, the hearing-impaired, or evangelical Protestants)
17 claim resources and seek inclusion in national narratives (Yúdice, 1990).

18 Whereas rights to culture did not appear in many of the world’s constitutions
19 until well into the twentieth century, contemporary charters emphasize it again and
20 again. The meaning is generally a double one, blending artistry and ethnicity, with
21 implications for both aesthetic and social hierarchies. Culture has come to “regulate
22 and structure ... individual and collective lives” (Parekh, 2000, 143) in competitive
23 ways that harness art and collective meaning for social and commercial purposes.
24 So the Spanish Minister for Culture can address Sao Paolo’s 2004 World Cultural
25 Forum with a message of cultural maintenance that is both about development,
26 almost in the traditional economic sense of the term, and the preservation of
27 identity – a means of economic and social growth and of cultural citizenship,
28 understood as a universal value placed in the specificity of different backgrounds
29 (“Foro Cultural,” 2004). But this is not some teleologically unfurling tale of
30 functionalist progress, with culture an emerging integrative norm. It has been
31 a site of real contestation, as per the US civil-rights movement, opposition to
32 the American War in Vietnam, youth rebellion, China’s Cultural Revolution, and
33 Third-World opposition to the exportation of corporate culture (Schiller, 2007, 19).

34 This simultaneously instrumental and moral tendency is especially important in
35 the United States, which is virtually alone amongst wealthy countries, both in the
36 widespread view of its citizens that their culture is superior to all others, and the
37 successful sale of that culture around the world. The United States has blended
38 preeminence in the two cultural registers, exporting both popular prescriptions
39 for entertainment (the humanities side) and economic prescriptions for labor
40 (the social-sciences side), even as their sender displays a willful ignorance of why
41 the rest of the world may not always and everywhere wish to follow its example,
42 despite consuming its pleasures (Pew Research Center for the People & the Press,
43 2003; Miller *et al.*, 2001 and 2005; Carreño, 2001, 22).

44 In 1996, cultural-industry sales (of film, music, television, software, journals,
45 and books) became the United States’ largest exports, ahead of aerospace,

1 defense, cars, and farming. Between 1977 and 1996, US copyright industries –
2 as that country likes to call them, overwriting the term “culture” and ensuring
3 comprehensive governmentalization and commodification – grew three times
4 as quickly as the overall economy. Between 1980 and 1998, annual world
5 trade in texts from the cultural industries increased from US\$95.3 billion to
6 US\$387.9 billion. In 2000, services created one dollar in seven of total world
7 production, and US services exported US\$295 billion, while the nation had
8 86 million private-sector jobs in this area, generating a US\$80 billion surplus
9 in balance of payments at a time when the country relied on trade to sustain its
10 society and economy. Under export-oriented Industrialization, with manufacturing
11 going offshore in search of cheap labor, culture became a crucial sector. The
12 requirement to drop import-substitution Industrialization in favor of exports has
13 clearly stimulated US cultural production, as the economy adjusts away from
14 a farming and manufacturing base to an ideological one. It now sells feelings,
15 ideas, money, health, laws, and risk – niche forms of identity. Culture clearly
16 resides at “the systemic core” of contemporary capitalism (Office of the US Trade
17 Representative, 2001, 1, 10, 15; Schiller, 2000, 101).

18 But it seems to me, an opinionated outsider, a vernacular economist, let
19 us say (I somehow completed two graduate-level classes in the 1980s on
20 labor and micro-economics), that within *bourgeois* economics, culture has
21 been a side-bar to the main theoretical and applied business of rent-seeking
22 academics, who are preoccupied with the theorization of econometrics and
23 rational choice, or the measurement of manufacturing, agriculture, and finance.
24 Economic attention to the arts, sport, and audiovisual entertainment has been scant,
25 although there is a predominantly neoclassical/abstract-empiricist Association
26 for Cultural Economics, which publishes the *Journal of Cultural Economics*,
27 and dutiful foot soldiers of capitalism and Friedmanite reductionists are littered
28 through the United States and international communications bureaucracies. When
29 I attended a 2003 academic conference on the economics of Hollywood at “a
30 large university in the mid-West,” every paper from the scions of business
31 and economics faculties focused on one topic, and one topic alone – how
32 firms could increase their revenues and diminish their risks. I felt like a fossil
33 that had been invited to walk the earth one more time amongst these very
34 contemporary handservants of capital. The goal of neoclassical media economics
35 is to organize resources in order to create capitalist goods. In this view, there are
36 three legitimate actors: consumers, companies, and the state (see Doyle, 2002,
37 any issue of the *Journal of Cultural Economics*, or Heilbrun and Gray, 2001).
38 On the other hand, much Marxist analysis has excluded the cultural sector as
39 “unproductive.”

40 Media studies has been dominated by three key topics, with varying degrees of
41 relevance for, and incarnations of, economics:

- 42 • ownership and control;
- 43 • content; and
- 44 • audiences.

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1 Within these categories lie several other divisions:

- 2 • Approaches to ownership and control vary between neoliberal endorsements
3 of limited regulation by the state, in the interests of guaranteeing market entry
4 for new competitors, and Marxist critiques of the *bourgeois* media's control
5 of the agenda for discussing society.
- 6 • Approaches to content vary between hermeneutics, which unearths the
7 meaning of individual texts and links them to broader social formations and
8 problems, and content analysis, which establishes patterns across significant
9 numbers of similar texts, rather than close readings of individual ones.
- 10 • Approaches to audiences vary between social-psychological attempts to
11 correlate audiovisual consumption and social conduct, and culturalist critiques
12 of imported audiovisual material threatening national culture.

13 Consider this schema:

<i>ORIGINS</i>	<i>TOPICS</i>	<i>OBJECTS</i>	<i>METHODS</i>	<i>DISCIPLINES</i>
Global	Regulation Industry Development	State Capital Labor	Political Economy Neoliberalism	Engineering Economics Political Science Law Communications
US	Genre	Text	Content Analysis	Communications
Global	Genre	Text	Textual Analysis	Literary/Cultural Studies
US	Uses	Audience	Uses and Gratifications	Communications Psychology Marketing
Global	Uses	Audience	Ethnography	Anthropology Cultural Studies Communications
US	Effects	Audience	Experimentation Questionnaire Psychoanalysis	Psychology Marketing, Communications Freudianism

14 Media studies is a deeply contested domain, fractured by politics, nation, discipline,
15 theory, and means.

16 Cultural studies is also a hybrid. Despite the dominant US discourse, it is
17 not just a product of literature departments engaging in a partial make-over
18 as students and young scholars favor increased social relevance. Historical and
19 contemporary cultural studies of slaves, crowds, pirates, bandits, minorities,
20 women, and the working class have utilized archival, ethnographic, and statistical
21 methods to emphasize day-to-day non-compliance with authority, via practices

1 of consumption that frequently turn into practices of production, and are both
2 imbricated with, and critical of, the prevailing social, economic, and cultural order.
3 For example, UK research on the contemporary has lit upon Teddy Boys, Mods,
4 bikers, skinheads, punks, school students, teen girls, Rastas, truants, drop-outs,
5 and magazine readers as its magical agents of history – groups who deviated
6 from the norms of schooling, and the transition to work, by generating moral
7 panics. Scholar-activists examine the structural underpinnings to collective style,
8 investigating how *bricolage* subverts the achievement-oriented, materialistic,
9 educationally-driven values and appearance of the middle class. The working
10 assumption has often been that subordinate groups adopt and adapt signs and
11 objects of the dominant culture, reorganizing them to manufacture new meanings.
12 Consumption is thought to be the epicenter of such subcultures. Paradoxically,
13 it has also reversed their members' status as consumers. The oppressed become
14 producers of new fashions, inscribing alienation and difference on their bodies
15 (Leong, 1992). The decline of the British economy and state across the 1970s was
16 said to have been exemplified in punk's use of rubbish as an adornment: bag-liners,
17 lavatory appliances, and ripped and torn clothing.

18 In its attention to inequality and identity, cultural studies' reintegration of
19 the humanities and the social sciences under the sign of socialism provided
20 "a riposte to the mandarin prejudice of high cultural journalism and the facile
21 classifications of market researchers" (Maxwell, 2002). But commodified fashion
22 and convention were not exactly resting. Capitalism appropriated the appropriator.
23 Even as the media set in train various moral panics about punk, the fashion and
24 music industries were sending out spies in search of trends to market. In the United
25 States, the contemporary equivalent is Coca-Cola hiring African Americans to
26 drive through the inner city selling soda and playing hip-hop – simultaneously
27 hawking, entertaining, and researching. This is the delightfully named "viral"
28 or "peer-to-peer" marketing, characteristic of such campaigns as McDonalds'
29 "365Black." It associates the company with civil rights via black athletes endorsing
30 its "food" in commercials, and rap musicians receiving remuneration each time
31 one of their songs referring to the company is played on radio, emulating Kanye
32 West "mentioning" 19 brands on 4 singles in 2004 – product placement most
33 viral. Such campaigns are meant to distinguish McDonalds from the tokenism
34 of Black History Month, in concert with new uniforms, designed in the hope
35 that young African-American employees will wear them socially and make them
36 stylish (McChesney and Foster, 2003, 12; Graser, 2005a and 2005b; MacArthur,
37 2005).

38 Virginia Postrel, then editor of the libertarian *Reason* magazine, and later a
39 *New York Times* economics journalist, wrote a 1999 op-ed piece for the *Wall Street*
40 *Journal* in which she described cultural studies as "deeply threatening to traditional
41 leftist views of commerce," because its notions of active consumption were so close
42 to the sovereign consumer beloved of the right: "The cultural-studies mavens are
43 betraying the leftist cause, lending support to the corporate enemy and even training
44 graduate students who wind up doing market research." Consumption seemed to be
45 the key to this mantra – with production discounted, labor forgotten, the consumer

1 sovereign, and government there to protect that sovereign. When I attended a
 2 2002 Australian academic conference on the role of cultural studies in stimulating
 3 consumer-driven cultural policies, I felt like a fossil as per the neoclassical love-fest
 4 a year later. How did I get to be so antediluvian?

5 For some 1960s' sociological functionalists, and many of us in cultural studies,
 6 commercial culture does indeed represent the apex of modernity. Far from being
 7 supremely alienating, it stands for the expansion of civil society, the first moment
 8 in history when central political and commercial organs and agendas became
 9 receptive to, and part of, the broad mass of the community. New forms of life
 10 were necessitated by industrialization, and aided by mass communication. The
 11 entire population was now part of the social, rather than excluded from political-
 12 economic calculation. The number of people classed as outsiders diminished in
 13 mass society, along with the lessening of authority, the promulgation of individual
 14 rights and respect, and the development of intensely interpersonal, large-scale
 15 human interaction. The spread of advertising broke down social barriers between
 16 high and low culture (Shils, 1966, 505–06, 511; Hartley, 1998). In the words of
 17 Postrel, an apologist for the contemporary moment, "We citizens of the future
 18 don't wear conformist jumpsuits, live in utilitarian high-rises, or get our food
 19 in pills." "We" expect individually tailored, boutique capitalism (2003, 4–5).
 20 Or as George Orwell said 65 years ago, to "an increasing extent the rich and
 21 the poor read the same books, and they also see the same films and listen
 22 to the same radio programmes" (1982). But the change towards a popularly
 23 available array of stylistic choices and forms of social participation has been
 24 accompanied by a shift from building and acknowledging a national popular to
 25 technologizing and privatizing it. For once all classes have been incorporated into
 26 society, the problems and promises they bring with them must be governed by
 27 technical forms of knowledge and systems of commodification (Martín-Barbero,
 28 2003, 38).

29 Despite its roots in the interests and identities of subordinated groups, some
 30 powerful strands of cultural studies in the 1990s lost political economy as their
 31 animator, transmogrifying into academic mirrors of the post-welfare state, and
 32 implicitly advocating neoliberalism. All-powerful customer-consumers (invented
 33 and loved by policy-makers, desired and feared by corporations) and all-powerful
 34 creator-consumers (invented and loved by cultural studies, tolerated and used
 35 by corporations) were said to be so clever and artful that they made their
 36 own meanings, outwitting institutions of the state, academia, and capital that
 37 sought to measure and control them. This exclusion of labor, or at least its
 38 conceptual subordination, has a storied history (Schiller, 1996, 153). When
 39 cultural studies made its Atlantic crossing, there were lots of not-very-leftist
 40 professors and students seemingly aching to hear that local audiences learning
 41 about domestic inequality, or parts of the world that their country bombs, invades,
 42 owns, misrepresents, or otherwise exploits, was less important, and less political,
 43 than those audiences' interpretations of actually existing soap operas, wrestling
 44 bouts, or science-fiction series. They even had allies amongst reactionary political
 45 scientists, who extolled the virtues of market-driven minimization of news, pared

1 down to the essentials: the survival and entertainment of audiences (Baum, 2002;
2 Zaller, 2003).

3 This position was elevated to a virtual *nostrum* in some cultural-studies research
4 into TV watchers and Internet users, who were thought to construct social
5 connections to celebrities and others that subverted patriarchy, capitalism, and
6 other forms of oppression. The popular was held to be subversive because its
7 texts were decoded by viewers in keeping with their own social situation. In other
8 words, the audience was weak at the level of cultural production, but strong as
9 an interpretative community, resisting consumer capitalism by rendering texts
10 unusually. And this happy state of affairs grew happier yet with the Internet.
11 We were told of women going online to incarnate new forms of female subjectivity,
12 passing as something that would be difficult for them to do in social life. But
13 consider this example: when *Wedding Crashers* (David Dobkin, 2005) was
14 released, the film's site included a feature known as "Trailer Crashers," which
15 permitted viewers to insert photographs of themselves into a template and be
16 twinned with the body and hairdo of a star of their choice from the text (Marlowe,
17 2005). Was this an instance of active audiences able to resist capitalist encoding?
18 Or one more incorporation of aberrant decoding into the norms and forms of
19 Hollywood? This issue came to characterize two decades or more of research and
20 teaching, in a way that fetishised text and reception. Questions of labor smacked
21 of crude economism, of a Marxism left behind by world events and textual theory,
22 mired in doctrines of false consciousness and censorious approaches to pleasure.

23 But much has changed since the Simple-Simon, academic-reader-as-hegemon
24 narcissism that plagued US cultural studies through much of the 1980s and '90s,
25 via professors earnestly spying on young people at the mall, or staring at them
26 in virtual communities. Political economy has reasserted itself, as it always does.
27 In Richard Maxwell's words, cultural studies began to "identify ways to link a
28 critique of neo-liberalism and a cultural studies approach to consumption ... not
29 by issuing nostrums against the pleasures of shopping but by paying attention
30 to the politics of resource allocation that brings a consumption infrastructure
31 into the built environment" (2002). This was exemplified by work done beyond
32 Britain, the United States, and their white-settler academic satellites (Israel,
33 Australia, Canada, and Aotearoa/New Zealand). Arvind Rajagopal notes that
34 because television, the telephone, the Internet, and the neoliberal are all new
35 to India, "markets and media generate new kinds of rights and new kinds of
36 imagination ... novel ways of exercising citizenship rights and conceiving politics"
37 (2002). Similarly, for Rosalía Winocur, radio in Latin America since the fall of US-
38 backed dictatorships has offered a simultaneously individual and social forum for
39 new expressions of citizenship, in the context of decentered politics, emergent
40 identities, minority rights, and gender issues – a public space that transcends
41 old ideas subordinating difference and privileging elite experience (2002, 15,
42 91–93). These are exemplary instances of work that understands the importance of
43 material conditions in the formation of identity. The links to understanding cultural
44 imperialism through the anti-colonial critiques of Aimé Césaire, Amílcar Cabral,
45 Frantz Fanon, Armand Mattelart, Herbert I Schiller, and Ariel Dorfman, which

1 animated both international political economy and cultural studies, have meant
2 that the bifurcation of labor and culture, for all its sticky origins in Cartesianism,
3 could not hold over time.

4 Clearly, contemporary media and cultural studies have their problems. Political
5 economy draws our attention to patterns of proprietorship and managerial control,
6 but it tends, ironically, to leave out work – the key place where value is made.
7 Active-audience research draws our attention to patterns of uptake and response,
8 but doesn't conceptualize them on a continuum with labor. Political economy
9 misses moments of crisis and hope, presenting a subject-free picture with structure
10 but no agency, other than shareholder maximization and managerial rationality.
11 Active-audience studies miss forms of domination and exploitation, presenting
12 an institution-free picture with agency but no structure, other than fan creativity
13 and reader imagination. And in both neoclassical and post-autistic economics,
14 a commercial relation is fundamental, with audience and labor quite separate.
15 But consider electronic games, where fee-paying "players" are involved in the
16 preparation of guides, walk-throughs, strategies, software modifications, counter-
17 narratives, ideas for new games, and much more – and sign away their intellectual
18 property as they do so (Taylor, 2006, 155). Perhaps understanding media/culture
19 economically "requires not one but two moments: the first centering on the media as
20 sites of institutionalized cultural production, and the second on audience-members
21 as producers who contribute to their own self-understanding" (Schiller, 1996, 194).

22 Socioeconomic analysis should ally with representational analysis. Historically,
23 the best political economy and the best cultural studies have worked through the
24 imbrication of power and signification at all points on the cultural continuum.
25 Graham Murdock puts the task well:

26 Critical political economy is at its strongest in explaining who gets to speak
27 to whom and what forms these symbolic encounters take in the major spaces
28 of public culture. But cultural studies, at its best, has much of value to say
29 about ... how discourse and imagery are organised in complex and shifting
30 patterns of meaning and how these meanings are reproduced, negotiated, and
31 struggled over in the flow and flux of everyday life (1995, 94)

32 Ideally, blending the two approaches would heal the "sterile fissure" between
33 fact and interpretation, between the social sciences and the humanities, between
34 truth and beauty – and do so under the sign of a principled approach to cultural
35 democracy (Wayne 2003, 84). To that end, Lawrence Grossberg recommends
36 "politicizing theory and theorizing politics," combining abstraction and grounded
37 analysis. This requires a focus on the contradictions of organisational structures,
38 their articulations with everyday life and textuality, and their intrication with the
39 polity and economy, refusing any bifurcation that opposes the study of production
40 and consumption, or fails to address axes of social stratification (Grossberg 1997,
41 4–5, 9–10).

42 Media and cultural studies remain, as I indicated earlier, contested fields.
43 This is in keeping with their interdisciplinarity, their doubts about the very

1 notion of settled knowledge, and their unstable binarism of economy and
2 meaning. With culture increasingly central to economic development as the
3 First World deindustrializes and no longer has much to sell beyond services
4 and weapons, this has led to an applied calculus, in addition to the traditional
5 humanities *donnée* of critique. In the case of cinema/film studies, every student
6 learns the ownership patterns of Hollywood. Unlike the literature major, they
7 know who owns the companies that sell the materials they analyze, and they
8 generally think it matters. And in the case of the creative industries, students'
9 ideology-of-the-artist *bourgeois* individualism is tempered by a sense that policies
10 and conglomerates stalk authors. The economic reductionism so abjured by
11 cultural studies in the past is no longer sustainable as an alibi for dodging
12 numbers and structures. Of course, the proclivity for interpretation, for single-
13 text analysis, for the Romantic elevation of consciousness, for a hermeneutics of
14 suspicion, for a notion of ethical incompleteness remain vibrant, even foundational,
15 notably in the United States. But as the object of analysis undergoes multiple
16 transformations, and becomes a force of material as much as symbolic power,
17 attention inevitably turns to theorizing the economy and worrying about *textual*
18 reductionism.

19 There is a complex future for media and cultural studies as they seek to
20 understand the economy, because their chosen fields are not just flavorful and
21 political, but financially crucial. One turn is towards the embrace of consumer
22 sovereignty, and the rhetoric of creativity and cultural policy. Another is towards a
23 more critical engagement. But there is no turning back, I suspect, to the Cartesian
24 binary, to unalloyed (c)(K)ant. Instead, there is the world offered by Léopold
25 Sédar Senghor, one where the "*reasoning-eye*" and the "*reason of the touch*" are
26 indissoluble (1964, 73).

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