

English 216: notes for Chapter 3 and 4

Chapter 3: Culturalism

- various breaks from previous Marxist & Leavisite ideas

Breaking from Classical Marxism

- **E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class***
 - the working class created itself as a reaction to its context
 - an example of **culturalism**: shift towards agency rather than determinism

Breaking from Leavisism (i.e., creating left-Leavisism)

- **Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy***
 - working-class culture is realistic/active; mass culture is fanciful/passive
 - looks at history from working-class point of view, inverts class perspective\
- **Raymond Williams, “The Analysis of Culture”**
 - pop culture works out problems in culture
 - i.e., “magical” solutions to real problems
 - **structures of feeling**: what it would be like to be in a time/place
 - doesn't define people by just documents or just consumption patterns
 - **selective tradition**: representing a time/place via our preferred examples
- **Stuart Hall & Paddy Whannel, *The Popular Arts***

- **popular art**: product of culture industry, but can still be enlightening
- **mass culture**: industrial/degrading; **high culture**: individual/enlightening
- youth culture & music:
 - must the study whole of cultural activity (not just the “text”)
 - audience appears to get something out of it (not just top-down)

Chapter 4: Marxisms

Classical Marxism

- **base**: material surroundings and ability to work with them
 - creates the terrain for the superstructure to happen
- **superstructure**: politics, economy, society that results from activity at the base
 - not determined by the base, contains lots of internal activity
- **class**: a group’s social position relative to activity at the base
- popular culture is a product of base and of interactions w/in superstructure

William Morris

- expands Marxist idea of **alienation**:
 - i.e., if you only ever sell your labour for money,
 - you’ll never develop a relationship with that labour
- **creative labour**: when labour and art are same thing (i.e., making something)
 - class distinctions would collapse into each other

The Frankfurt School

- **culture industry**: for-profit entertainment (capitalist); i.e., popular culture
- conforms to industry needs and also promotes conformity
- **mass culture**: standardized content, pseudo-individualizes audience
 - claims we're in the ideal world, thus negates need for rebellion
- **art**: by definition, resists or critiques the culture industry (i.e., capitalism)
- problem: the culture industry not this effective or monolithic

- **Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"**
 - **aura**: the specific, contextualized meaning of a signifying object
 - mechanical reproduction obliterates the aura: new contexts, new meanings
 - so meaning is made in the act of consumption, not determined by production

- **Althusser**
 - **ideology**: practiced; reality is what you do, ideology is how you represent it
 - these representations perpetuate class domination
 - dominant classes are also convinced; they see their domination as natural
 - **ISA (ideological state apparatus)**: institutions that perpetuate ideology
 - **RSA (repressive state apparatus)**: institutions that enforce ideology
 - **problematic**: when ideology tries to represent something outside of itself
 - **symptomatic**: looking for the traces that (futile) effort leaves behind
 - **interpellation**: when you subject yourself to ideology via discourse
 - problem: it's presumed to always be successful & never conflict

- **Antonio Gramsci**
 - **hegemony**: dominant group tries to naturalize its own ideology

- **compromise equilibrium**: subordinated groups agree with hegemonic values (against their interests)
 - RSAs held in reserve in case of actual rebellion
- **organic intellectuals**: represent hegemonic values; can be ISAs
- **bricolage**: youths use hegemonic culture for resistance,
 - but resistance gets incorporated into the power structure

Post-Marxism and Cultural Studies

- **articulation**: making meaning in the contextual connection of text & reader¹
- **culture**: is when groups of people tend to articulate in the same ways
 - culture defines what is “common sense” or “natural”
 - i.e., what the physical world is made to mean by ideology
- **mass culture**: not always convincing, the people are not always duped

NB: these notes are compiled from John Storey's *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, 7th Edition. They are for studying purposes only.

English 216: notes for Chapter 1 and 2

Chapter 1: What is popular culture?

- defines **culture**, **ideology**, and the **popular**
- thesis: all definitions are contextual; i.e., meaning is made in the context

Culture: three concepts (Raymond Williams)

- **high** (“ideal”): intellectual, spiritual, & aesthetic enlightenment

- **practical** (“way of life”): everyday culture of a group of people
- **signifying** (“documentary”): anything that signifies
- products & practices of intellectual & artistic activity

Ideology

- **reductive**: a system of beliefs belonging to a given group of people
- **Marxist**: the beliefs of the dominant group, i.e., “false consciousness”
 - i.e., as opposed to the reality of materialism (see Ch 4)
- **hegemonic**: culture is struggle b/w beliefs of dominant and dominated
 - dominant group has more power, tries to normalize its own domination
- **structuralist**: naturalizes beliefs of dominant group through signification
- **performative**: rituals and customs that perpetuate certain beliefs

Popular Culture

- **numerically** popular: favoured by large numbers of people
 - problem: majority or plurality? how do we measure?
- **low culture**: whatever isn’t “high”; a marker of class
- **mass culture**: mass-produced, profit-driven, corporate
 - undeserving of intellectual engagement, only sociological study

Contextuality

- meaning is produced by interaction of text and...
 - **other texts** (intertextuality): literature, theory, etc.
 - **the reader** (subjectivity): knowledge, experience, subject position
 - **material situation**: reading practices, nature of the medium, etc.
- therefore: these definitions are in use all the time, depending on context

Chapter 2: The Culture and Civilization Debate

- industrialization and urbanization push classes into the same space: cities
- working class is created, starts to make its own culture (instead of sharing culture with the dominant class)

Matthew Arnold (mid-1800s)

- **culture** is “the best that has been thought and said in the world”
- **popular culture** is anarchy¹ (i.e., rule by the people not the aristocrats)
- solution: new middle class will run the democratic state
 - the state should instill obedience to that middle class
 - obedience can be fostered through aspiration to the middle class

Leavisites (1930s)

- fully agree with Arnold, except that culture has further declined
- tried to put his theories into practice:
 - i.e., recruit intellectuals to promote “culture”
- in the process, they created terminology & theories of popular culture
 - i.e., the only way to talk about pop culture was to use Leavisite language

American “consensus” (post-WWII)

- defend against cultural degradation from the inside; i.e., popular culture
 - i.e., just like they were defending against communism from the outside
- solution: cultural **consensus** around individualism (democracy/capitalism)
 - i.e., class distinctions are meaningless if everyone has money & can vote
- consensus almost exclusively white, straight, Christian, and male
- excluded women, POC, Indigenous, other religions, queer, disabled, etc.

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The Myth of Innovation

I'm listening to a podcast with Chris "@nerdist" Hardwick and Ron "Hellboy" Perlman, and they're having a rambling, jokey conversation, so what I'm about to write is a *little* unfair because no rambling, jokey conversation could ever stand up to critical rigour (I know mine couldn't!), but something Hardwick said got me thinking, and credit where credit is due.



Perlman describes a shift he witnessed from single- or group-owned film studios (ostensibly run by filmmakers) to corporate-owned studios whose only responsibility is making a bigger and bigger profit every quarter. He calls that the tail wagging the dog. Hardwick responds:

Then you start trend-chasing, and then when you're trend-chasing, [...] you're going downhill because you're chasing things that already have peaked, you know, instead of innovating. [As a result] there's not enough innovation because innovation is riskier [...] I mean in their minds [it's riskier]. I think it's riskier the opposite way.

It's not at all surprising to hear two working artists talk this way, and that mindset might be the only way to do what they do (and I *like* the stuff that both of those guys create, to be clear), but there's a misconception, here, that's worth exploding.

The innovators that we can point to in pop culture (I use pop-culture examples because they're approachable, we all know them, and they're easy to bring to mind) are rarely people who created something entirely new. Maybe I'm being too literal with Hardwick's choice of words, but the people we remember are almost always *adaptors*.

Think about one of Hardwick's favourite filmmakers: Guillermo del Toro. *Pacific Rim* is not entirely new. It's a gleeful take on Japanese *giant, fighting robot* anime and *giant monster* ("kaiju") movies. Now, I love this movie, for lots of reasons, but when people talked about it as if it were the only original film of its year, there was always an asterisk in my mind; it's not a sequel or a remake, certainly—which Hollywood money people love because they think it means they can spend less money on marketing—but it *is* an adaptation of two pre-existing genres, genres that certain audiences (me, for example) have a pre-existing emotional relationship with (which is why Hollywood thinks it doesn't have to spend as much on marketing). That's why I giggle like a child when the giant robot delivers a rocket-powered punch or pulls out a sword—because I have a strong *emotional* reaction to those tropes—and that [nostalgia](#) was a huge selling point for that movie.

Take a more obvious example and see how far the rabbit hole goes. Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* started a trend for sumptuous fantasy films (i.e., lots of "period" costumes and sets) but it's an adaptation of a series of books that are, themselves, adaptations of the Old English epics and romances that Tolkien spent his career studying: *Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Beowulf* being the most obvious.

We can play that game with canonical English literature, too. Almost all of Shakespeare's plays, certainly all the ones that most people have heard of, are based on other people's work. He took them and adapted them to his time, his city, his stage. *Hamlet* goes through half a dozen different permutations before Shakespeare lays hands on it, but we've never heard of those. *Othello* is based on an Italian short story, "Un Capitano Moro" ("A Moorish Captain"). *The Tempest* is

a fantastical revisioning of an actual shipwreck and subsequent attempt to survive on a small island.

We can even play that game with technology. The ipod (I refuse to spell it with that stupid upper-case “p”) was by no means the first mp3-player on the market. Apple waited until several others were out there, and then did what they always do: made a more intuitive, human-centred design and integrated it into their existing lineup of products. Same with smart phones and, going way back, same with desktop computers.

But let’s go even further back in time. The Lumière brothers are often cited as the inventors of the film camera, but there were actually several different inventors around the world who were working on the problem of moving pictures (the logical next step after static pictures). The Lumières just happen to have assembled all their inventions in one machine and added a few of their own. (Edison was so late to that party that he’s not really worth mentioning, but boy howdy did he take the credit!)

My point is, none of these people were *innovators* in the sense of having created something entirely, completely new; they were *adaptors*. They took things that were already around and revised, reassembled, and re-presented them. But we don’t remember the original *things* they adapted, or if we do, we twist our minds around to ascribing “originality” onto the adaptation, as if adaptation weren’t its own, perfectly valid form of creation. (And I suspect, if I were somehow to get into a conversation with Hardwick and/or Perlman, they wouldn’t disagree. Again, I’m just chasing an idea, here.)

This whole thing got me thinking about the social mechanism by which we ascribe originality onto adaptors, and lead me back *all* the way Julia Round’s notion of “superscription” from “Fragmented Identity: the Superhero Condition,” (*International Journal of Comic Art*, 7.2), something I heard her read back at a grad-student conference in 2005. In a nutshell, once a particularly popular version of a character gets published in American comics, it over-writes (“superscribes”) previous versions of the character, as if that new version captured what the character was always “supposed” to be, as if that new version what it “really” was the whole time, thus is it both timeless *and* new, innovative *and* adapted.

Her example is the Demon Etrigan, but a more well-known one is Batman, who had turned very silly indeed during the 50s and 60s, and whom Neil Adams and Denny O'Neil made much darker in the 70s, which is what Frank Miller drew on in *The Dark Knight Returns*, another great example of the person who was *most successful* at adapting a character being perceived as the originator even though others did the same thing before him.

We don't remember innovators and originators. We remember the ones that were the most successful in their moment, and then we *superscribe* the ones who came before them so that we can *create* a singular creator who invented something all by himself (only occasionally herself, sexism being what it is). This process allows us to perpetuate the illusion of the lone genius whose ideas spring fully formed from his mind without any influence, *or* the artist who has a direct line to the Muses or God or "the universe" and simply acts as a vessel for the divine.

It's bullshit, obviously, and the only reason we do it is because we're told from an early age that originality is *the best* route to good art/invention, so then we start using originality as *the measure* of good art/invention, and thus the tail starts wagging the dog. This insistence on originality is culturally specific to late-modern Westerners. It wasn't the dominant mode before, say, the Romantics; Shakespeare would have made no secret and had no embarrassment about the fact that most of his work was adaptation, and we shouldn't either.

I want to switch to a different way of talking about good art/invention. I want a new word. The best I've come up with, and I'd love something better, is *synthesis*. You took what was already around you, mashed it all together, dropped some of it, changed some of it, added stuff from your own brain (which itself came from other places and was mashed up inside your head), and then *synthesized* something that is both made up of pre-existing stuff *and* somehow unique to itself.

Maybe that's what Hardwick and Perlman both meant by "innovation" and I'm just being a pedant, but I want this to be the measure of creativity: not *originality* but the ability to *synthesize*. That means that those "trend chasers" that Hardwick is talking about could very well make the best damn movie of the decade, not because they were chasing the trend, but because they *executed* the movie (and the marketing campaign, we're talking popularity here!) better than the ones that came before.

Internet Slowdown



@ghweldon: “So... why exactly do Normals like it? Explain it to me like I’m five.”

Glen Weldon posted a tweet last week about the season finale of *Game of Thrones*. Here it is, in its entirety:



The answers he got mostly say “soap opera with boobs,” to which he responded:



The question kept stewing in my head, so I had to answer it. Like anything in entertainment that gets a big audience, there's no one answer to how it happened. A whole set of factors make *Game of Thrones* a huge hit, just like a whole set of factors gets *Firefly* cancelled (one of those being "Fox is run by idiots"), which is to say that relative quality is just not going to answer the question. I think there are a few factors that we can confidently point to, totally aside from questions of quality: soapiness, exploitation, economics, audience savvy. I'll start with the two answers that Weldon did get.

The soapiness of the show is a huge draw. I don't think there's any question about that. These characters and their personalities all grind against each other in entertaining ways, especially in the courtly settings, most especially at King's Landing. Watching pretty, charming people bounce off of each other is entertaining and has been for a long, long time. I happen to catch a tweet from Dan Savage about this that reflects exactly the attitude I'm sure a lot of "normals" have (and yes, in this context, Dan Savage qualifies as a "normal"; weird, eh?):



His tweet is followed by a lot of like-minded viewers who have the same complaint, and I can't blame them. If you're watching the show as something akin to a period piece—costumes, sets, fancy accents—then the Wall and the Wildlings and the battle sequences must seem utterly uninteresting, but there's definitely enough of the soapy/period piece stuff to keep you watching.

On the other hand, if you're watching just for the exploitative content, the sex and violence, then the soapy bits of the show might bore you to death, and I read comments by a lot of *Battlestar Galactica* fans who said the same thing: why is all this annoying "political" stuff in my sci-fi action show!?! (Hint: because it's not an

action show, dummies.) To be clear, I'm using "exploitative" in a not-entirely-pejorative sense. I simply mean the kinds of spectacle that film and TV producers "exploit" in order to get eyeballs and thus money. Something we'd call a trick rather than drama, such as inventing a buxom, red-headed prostitute character just for the show so that you can put a bunch of scenes in a brothel, and have her conveniently follow the action from one location to the next. Y'know, for example.

There's an added element to the sexuality, though. Weldon's right that boobs are everywhere on cable TV, and I'd add that the internet is *made of boobs* (and cat videos), but the difference in something like *Game of Thrones* is that it's the sexuality of characters whom we get to know and have an emotional relationship with. That relationship makes it all the more arousing to see them with their clothes off and possibly having sex with other people with whom we have that same relationship. That's why we like watching romantic stories, that's why we "ship" characters on television shows. We're flirting and wooing and courting by proxy, and if we can also watch them actually consummate the relationship, all the better.

So, to be sure, the show is soapy and sexy and violent, and those things have a certain appeal. Savage's post also rebuts Weldon's response: many people watch the show *despite* the dragons and magic and Harryhausen skeletons (although Savage was referring to the battle at the Wall). They have other options, yes, but this show has high production values, and it's *what's on right now*. Sometimes success begets success. Once everyone's talking about it, we get a bit of a herding effect, although Savage does say he "loves" it, so it's not like he's just watching so that he's got something to talk to his son about.

But there are other factors, here, and one of them is money. We have two things meeting in the middle with this show. First, HBO has a lot of money to throw at it. They did the same thing with *Rome*, although that one was cancelled after two seasons partly for reasons of costs. Second, though, because of CG, special effects get cheaper and more sophisticated on the exact same curve as anything else to do with electronics. The same is also true of most of the tech around film making itself. *Game of Thrones* is [filmed on digital cameras](#), for example, which not only saves on stock and processing but has all kinds of secondary savings on set, so while it's a horrendously expensive show, it would have been impossibly expensive just ten years ago.

This gets to an argument I've read (can't recall where, sorry!) that superheroes have found their "true" home on film because of CG. Film can convincingly depict the impossible in a way that it couldn't before, so it can show us Spider-Man's acrobatics, Superman's speed, Batman's kinetic violence, etc. The same is generally true of a lot of high-concept SF and fantasy. Daenerys can pet her dragons without having to cut away to a hand on puppet from a shot of a green-tinted, stop-motion head that repeats the same motion three times in a row. The technology doesn't make all film/TV cheaper evenly, though. It's especially forgiving to stuff that requires heavy F/X, which means that technology and money are now affecting which *genres* we have access to, and therefore what even has a *chance* to get popular to begin with.

And that brings me all the way around to the audience's genre savvy. *Lord of the Rings* was ten years ago. It's been a decade since I could refer to Sauron and Mordor in mixed company without people looking at me like I'm crazy, or for that matter, since I could suggest that a *Batman* movie might actually have social and political significance, or since I could tell people my dissertation was on comic books without them rolling their eyes at me. That means a couple of things. First, and most obviously, it means that the audience will really *get* the premise behind *A Song of Ice and Fire*, that there was (allegedly) an age of heroes, of great deeds and the great men (and occasionally women) who performed them, but that it has passed, and that we're now living in a fallen, dilapidated version of that world. Ned Stark and Robert Baratheon are veterans of that age, but then they won the war, and Robert got fat, and Ned turns out to have been incredibly naive the whole time. You have to have seen something like *Lord of the Rings* for that premise to have an impact. HBO's version of Martin wouldn't make emotional sense if we hadn't seen Jackson's version of Tolkien with our own eyes. (Full disclosure, *Lord of the Rings* is already a "fallen" world in Tolkien's mythology, but that's beside the point of this discussion.)

The other thing, though, is that we've spent a decade training audiences to be comfortable with a story that is *both* soapy *and* fantastical. Dan Savage doesn't grok it (which is absolutely fine; I'm not trying to attack the guy), but us comic-book/fantasy nerds do. A couple of friends of mine are nearly a dozen episodes into [a podcast about the X-Men](#), and they start every episode by calling it "our favourite superhero soap opera," *and they're right*. I remember realizing when I was about fifteen that a least half of the content of the Superman comics I was

reading was about his relationship with Lois, and that it had always been that way. I wouldn't find out until years later that most of the architects of the superhero genre spent several years writing romance comics between the "golden" and "silver" ages, and that experience showed in their superhero comics, but I was sensing it in the plots anyway. Superheroes and fantasy lit have always been soap operas with combat sequences and gnarly powers, which is why *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, created and primarily written by a Marvel fan called "Joss Whedon," has the bizarre ability to bounce between comedy, melodrama, and action while still feeling coherent. Comics and fantasy have been perfecting that tonal quality for nearly a hundred years now, *and the mainstream audience gets it!*

And that, Glen, is why *Game of Thrones* appeals to the normals, because they're not normals any more. Entertainment companies have been (for not entirely altruistic reasons) converting them for going on twenty years now. They'll never again have the sense of exclusion we did, being mocked for liking something too passionately, so they'll never quite be geeks *like us*, but they do "get it," the thrill of the genre. We might be looking at the evolution of a particular set of genre tastes, the upshot of which is that the concept of the geek as we know it simply doesn't apply any more.