



CRITICAL THEORIES OF MASS MEDIA



THEN AND NOW



Paul A. Taylor and Jan Ll. Harris

Critical Theories of Mass Media: Then and Now

Critical Theories of Mass Media: Then and Now

Paul A. Taylor and Jan LI. Harris



Open University Press

Open University Press
McGraw-Hill Education
McGraw-Hill House
Shoppenhangers Road
Maidenhead
Berkshire
England
SL6 2QL

email: enquiries@openup.co.uk
world wide web: www.openup.co.uk

and Two Penn Plaza, New York, NY 10121—2289, USA

First published 2008

Copyright © Paul A. Taylor and Jan LI. Harris 2008

All rights reserved. Except for the quotation of short passages for the purpose of criticism and review, no part of this publication may reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher or a licence from the Copyright Licensing Agency Limited. Details of such licences (for reprographic reproduction) may be obtained from the Copyright Licensing Agency Ltd of Saffron House, 6–10 Kirby Street, London, EC1N 8TS.

A catalogue record of this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 13: 9780 335218110 (pb) 9780 335218127 (hb)
10: 03335 218113 (pb) 0335218121 (hb)

Typeset by Kerrypress Ltd, Luton, Bedfordshire
Printed in Poland by OZGraf S.A.
www.polskabook.pl

It comes as a shock to that first audience.
The street they walked in off just moments before
hangs pale on the wall ...
*and their hairs stand on end to a shimmer of leaves
or the movement of clouds, and the way the tense
has been thrown like a switch, where the land turns to dreams,
and where,
sad to say, we have been living since.*
(Paul Farley, 'Electricity', from *The Boy from the Chemist is Here to See You*)

I was witnessing a time when most things, including hard cash and our perception of reality itself, were about to be turned into an idea of themselves ... I began to notice the insistence of image over substance and this insistence began to pester me, like a bad radio station that you can't afford to turn off.

... we were just that bit too old to buy into the rumble of a world described by advertising and products ... That was the world where everything had turned into an idea of itself, where life no longer had an inner life ... It's a process which just seems to have built up, like an accumulation of fat around the heart's weary muscle.

(Michael Bracewell, *Perfect Tense*)

Contents

Chapter outlines	ix
Acknowledgements	xiii
Introduction	1
Part 1 Then	
1 Walter Benjamin's ' <i>Work of art</i> ' essay	17
2 Siegfried Kracauer's <i>mass ornament</i>	39
3 Theodor Adorno and the culture industry	62
4 Marshall McLuhan's understanding of the media	85
5 Guy Debord's <i>Society of the Spectacle</i>	107
Part 2 Now	
Introduction to Part 2	131
6 The <i>culture</i> of celebrity	133
7 <i>Banality TV</i> : the democratization of celebrity	155
8 The politics of banality: the <i>ob-scene</i> as the <i>mis-en-scène</i>	177
Conclusion	198
Notes	215
Bibliography	223
Index	235

Acknowledgements

Paul: warmest regards to the stalwart, and justifiably cynical, fellow barrel-dwellers from The Eldon Club branch of the Diogenes Society (past and present) – Kishore Budha, Allison Cavanagh, Richard Howells, Azeez Lukumann, Diane Myers, and Nicholas Ray – diamonds in the midden.

Jan: for Maisie R.I.P.

Chapter outlines

Introduction

The need for more critical engagement with the cultural consequences of the mass media is asserted. It is suggested that contemporary theorists have been too willing to overlook the various alienating and inauthentic aspects of mediated culture in their enthusiasm to detect evidence of proactive interpretive activity within mass audiences. Excessively optimistic faith in such interpretive activities are discussed using the umbrella term *cultural populism*. A brief critique of cultural populism is provided in preparation for this book's corrective presentation of an alternative perspective based upon both a historical and a contemporary account of such central critical theory tenets as *the culture industry thesis* – the argument that mass media culture is disproportionately commodified and systematized.

Part 1 *Then*

Chapter 1 Walter Benjamin's 'The work of art' essay

Walter Benjamin's essay, '*The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction*' (henceforth referred to as the Essay), is presented as a seminal piece from which to better understand the 'hinge point' in the development of the mass media. Despite its generally optimistic tenor, Benjamin's examination of photography and early cinema is shown to contain the roots of a much more pessimistic interpretation of the harmful cultural effects of mass media. We argue that Benjamin's Essay reveals how technological reproduction is intrinsically aligned with commodity values at the expense of non-commodified culture.

Chapter 2 Siegfried Kracauer's Mass Ornament

A contemporary of Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer shared some of the former's optimism regarding the potentially emancipatory qualities the mass media held for their audiences. However, there is a need to reassess the more critical aspects of Kracauer that lie close to the

surface of his treatment of popular culture, particularly his concepts of *Ratio*, the *cult of distraction* and the *mass ornament*. It is argued that the negative implications of these notions remain highly relevant to a critical understanding of today's media.

Chapter 3 *Theodor Adorno and the culture industry*

Adorno's *culture industry thesis* is defended as a key intellectual resource with which to approach contemporary media. Sharing both Benjamin and Kracauer's interest in the theme of *distraction* as a new mode of audience reception in the age of mass media, Adorno's work is explored for the ways in which it highlights the links to be found between media technologies and the fundamental philosophical underpinnings of Western capitalist culture. It is argued that, far from being unduly cynical and elitist as critics often suggest, Adorno's *culture industry thesis* actually underestimated the sophistication and reach of today's mediascape.

Chapter 4 *Marshall McLuhan's understanding of the media*

Despite the apparent optimism with which he analysed media technologies, McLuhan's work is shown to contain the seeds of a deeply critical portrayal of the media's social impact. He consistently emphasizes the various ways in which the media profoundly rearrange and disorientate the human sensorium. McLuhan shows how the media promote essentially reactive, adaptive responses to *their* needs rather than those of the societies they increasingly dominate.

Chapter 5 *Guy Debord's Society of the Spectacle*

Part 1 concludes with an account of Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*. This brings together the key themes of the previous chapters with Debord's conception of a mass media society whose cultural frame of reference is dominated by the ubiquitous and defining presence of the spectacle. In conjunction with the previous examination of McLuhan, Debord's theory is shown to provide a key transition point between the theorists of the *then* who wrote in the relatively early days of mass media society and Part 2's treatment of the *now* and more recent forms of the *society of the spectacle*.

Part 2 *Now*

Chapter 6 *The culture of celebrity*

The origins and current prevalence of celebrity values in mass culture are examined in direct relation to Part 1's themes of the

decline of aura and the culture industry thesis. New forms of celebrity are defined and examined in the context of a critical account of their cultural effects. The tautological nature of contemporary fame in which people are frequently famous merely for being famous, irrespective of any other identifiable talent, is analysed as an aspect of industrial production processes that are now applied to culture in an unprecedentedly sophisticated fashion. It is suggested that, from a critical perspective, celebrity *now* serves to undermine the positive role Benjamin foresaw for distraction *then*.

Chapter 7 Banality TV: the democratization of celebrity

Part 1's critique of cultural populism is continued with a critical assessment of theories that find empowering possibilities within the pervasive phenomenon of celebrity. The counter argument is put forward that, as the human embodiment of commodity values, contemporary forms of celebrity represent a further disturbing expansion of the culture industry's harmful effects. *Banality TV* is the term used to describe celebrity's widespread democratization within the increasing conflated genres of lifestyle programmes, Reality TV¹ and chat shows. These formats consist of predominantly unscripted presentations of everyday life but the idea that this fosters increased audience involvement and empowerment is critically offset against the conception of *Banality TV* as an ultimately disempowering phenomenon intimately related to the media's promotion of contingent, superficial detail over substantive thought.

Chapter 8 The politics of banality: the obscene as the mis-en-scène

The final chapter argues that instead of being an exclusively cultural phenomenon, *Banality TV* has profound political consequences. World events such as 9/11, the Gulf conflicts and the Abu Ghraib controversy are used in conjunction with Jean Baudrillard's conception of the *obscene* to demonstrate critical media theories' continued importance for a fuller understanding of popular culture's ideological qualities.

Introduction: Cultural populism and Critical theory

The new Plato's Cave

I want you to go on to picture the enlightenment or ignorance of our human condition somewhat as follows. Imagine an underground chamber like a cave, with a long entrance open to the daylight and as wide as the cave. In this chamber are men who have been prisoners there since they were children, their legs and necks being so fastened that they can only look straight ahead of them and cannot turn their heads. Some way off, behind and higher up, a fire is burning, and between the fire and the prisoners and above them runs a road, in front of which a curtain-wall has been built, like the screen at puppet shows between the operators and their audience, above which they show their puppets ...

(Plato 1955: 317)

Plato's allegory of prisoners in a cave is contained within *The Republic* (approx 375 BC). It was originally used to describe the philosophical difficulty of uncovering truth in a human world that is inevitably error-strewn. From our contemporary perspective we can easily imagine the shadows projected onto the cave wall as a primitive form of cinema projection and thus Plato's image becomes highly resonant with our own media-saturated society. Citing Plato from the very beginning of this book underlines the key *now* and *then* theme of its subtitle. Any novelty in the following analysis stems paradoxically from the relatively unfashionable insistence that the central tenets of critical theories of mass media are still highly relevant despite their relatively marginal position in mainstream cultural/communication studies and the sociology of the media. This book aims to give these critical theories of the past a fresh impetus from more recent theoretical developments. It is hoped that this will provide an antidote to the present dominance within academic discourse of excessively uncritical theories of mass-media culture that contribute to our staying bound within a new Plato's Cave – albeit an unprecedentedly comfortable one replete with high-definition plasma screens.

The lack of a critical edge to much discussion of the mass media has profoundly dangerous political implications for two main reasons.

- 1 The inhabitants of Plato's Cave lacked the physical freedom to see the unmediated reality beyond the cave entrance that was causing the shadows on the wall. In the new mass-media cave the constraints are all the more insidiously effective for their predominantly immaterial and frequently voluntary nature¹. To paraphrase Marx – mankind is free yet everywhere he is in chainstores.

We shall see in the following chapters that our mass-media environment is permeated by ideological components that are overlooked – not because they don't exist, but rather because they are an innate part of how the media functions. Familiarity not only breeds contempt – it also sometimes makes it difficult to spot what is under our noses so that:

- 2 Even when the mass media's deeply ideological aspects are recognized, instead of being seen as a source for concern, uncritical theories of the media have a perverse tendency to celebrate such ideological processes as evidence of the rude health of cultural life and agency within mass media society.

In the following pages it is repeatedly pointed out how this tendency constitutes a particularly disturbing variation upon Plato's allegory of the Cave. At least the original dwellers could claim the mitigating circumstance of enforced imprisonment: frequently, their counterparts in the contemporary media cave (and their apologist theorists) appear to connive actively at their own oppression.

The trouble with being critical: in defence of pessimism

To complement the above two main political dangers, there are also two basic problems faced by critical theories of mass media.

- 1 It is difficult to gain the necessary analytical distance to properly understand the social implications of the mass media.

Marshall McLuhan compared the difficulty of seeking an objective perspective upon the media to explaining the notion of water to a fish, while Friedrich Kittler (1990, 1997, 1999) argues that we can only begin to understand media configurations from a suitably long historical perspective, thus questioning the possibility of meaningful contemporaneous analysis. In *Plato's Cave* (1991), John O'Neil describes the additional problem of developing a *critical* perspective in relation to the media:

One is either a player, a committed commentator, or a fan – but hardly ever is a place kept for the contemplative mind. To

claim to know more than what is going on in the media than the media allow for, however, is to be out of joint with the form and content of the media. Critics of the media are exiles, or else they are allowed to strut their brief moment among life's killjoys, as a reminder of those higher things for which we have neither the time nor the taste.

(O'Neil 1991: 21)

Implicit in O'Neil's complaint is a sense of the overwhelming immediacy of the media environment that successfully displaces any attempt to obtain a more considered vantage point. But, rather than producing critical engagement with this situation, difficult as that may be, the dominant response from current media theorists tends to be one of excessively optimistic celebration. They laud the media's powerful ability to produce environments predicated upon the untrammelled pervasion of immanent flows of information² and images but fail to consider how much *genuine* empowerment can be gained from engagement with such heavily pre-processed content, no matter how imaginative and proactive that engagement attempts to be. This book's assessment of the possibilities for empowerment is much more straightforwardly pessimistic.

2 Critics of mass culture are often accused of being conservative, out-of-touch elitists.

In relation to the vexed question of optimism versus pessimism, this book seeks to:

- rectify the situation whereby critical theory has been unfairly neglected simply because of its downbeat tone – there seems little intellectual basis for the common tendency to automatically prize positive interpretations over more negative ones, especially if the Old Testament (a foundational cultural text of *then* if ever there was one) is correct in claiming: 'For in much wisdom is much vexation; and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow' (Ecclesiastes 1:18).
- suggest that even amid theories generally accepted as optimistic, there is frequently ample evidence for a more critical rereading.

Consistently, valid grounds for critical engagement with the media seem to be unduly passed over in preference for Panglossian analyses. At certain crucial points, commentators wilfully either step around, or even over, those negative elements that early theorists did in fact identify but which they thought could be overcome. Such optimism is more understandable in the early days of the mass media but our benefit of historical hindsight makes uncritical repetitions of these interpretations, at best, untenable, and at worst,

disingenuous. This book explores past thinkers who are explicitly critical thinkers (Adorno and Debord) but also those we label critical based upon our against-the-grain reading of their underlying critical credentials (Benjamin and McLuhan). A common quality that unites both optimistic and pessimistic sets of thinkers is their shared belief that the media is deeply disruptive to prior forms of social organization. There is a surprising amount of agreement on the basic social processes of the mass media but radically different conclusions as to their ultimate cultural consequences.

Cultural populism: the paradox of conservatism

Past and present critical media theories emphasize the negative consequences that stem from the innately commodified nature of such mass cultural phenomenon as Reality TV (for example, Andrejevic 2004) and lifestyle Television (Palmer 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007). *New audience theory*, *reception studies* and *cultural populism* are, among others, all terms used to describe those studies of the media that tend to emphasize the empowerment enjoyed by mass audiences. In relation to the media's content, they focus upon audiences' productive emotional investments, imaginative interpretations, and the generally active, non-passive nature of their counter-hegemonic reading strategies. Although the relevant literature in this field is rich and diverse³, the term *cultural populism*⁴ is used in this book as an umbrella term to create a dichotomy between these approaches and much more obviously negative critical theories. While producing a dichotomy risks simplifying matters for the sake of a clear contrast, there are obvious characteristics that do distinguish the two approaches.

Contemporary rejection of critical media theory is largely based upon varying degrees of post-structuralist sensitivity to the ways in which the audience can re-appropriate the meanings imposed upon them by the owners and producers of media content. Rather than seeing media audiences or commodity consumers as simply passive consumers of the products of an overarching culture industry, cultural populists (broadly defined) prefer to emphasize the way in which audiences actively reinterpret or 'read' programmes or products using alternative meanings better suited to their own particular, localized environments (McLaughlin 1996). Fiske (1987, 1989a, 1989b, 1993, 1996), is a particularly radical proponent of the notion that rather than being passive dupes of the culture industry, mass-media audiences are in fact skilled interpreters of media content. He forcefully argues against the culture industry's focus upon the manipulation of audiences and uses concepts such as *polysemy* and *heteroglossia* to discuss how audiences apply a large and

adaptable range of interpretations to the media content they consume. Other typical features of cultural populism include an emphasis upon the *performative* (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998) and the *participatory* (Livingstone and Lunt 1994) aspects of audiences. More recently, while some recognition has been given to its underlying commodity values, the notion of the *ordinary* in media content has been presented as a site of potentially empowering interpretive contestations for equally ordinary audiences (Brundson et al. 2001; Giles 2002; Taylor 2002; Kompare 2004; Bonner 2003).

In recent years there have also been various critical accounts of lifestyle and Reality TV programmes (brought together in this book under the term *Banality TV*) that allude to the relationship between media *form* and *content* but which mostly concentrate upon the discursive and persuasive aspects of the latter. For example, Lorenzo-Dus (2006) examines the manipulative aspects encoded within British property shows, Dunn (2006) adopts a similar approach to the personalized voyeurism of holiday programmes that concentrate more upon presenters and particular participants than the destinations themselves, and Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer (2006) explore the ideological components of a new spate of make-over shows (involving a range of targets from participants' property to their bodies). This book concentrates more upon those critical thinkers who see the negative cultural effects of the media as an *innate* part of their mode of operation. The fact that their theories are consequently pessimistic about the possibilities for *any* media content being significantly re-appropriated and reinterpreted in a particularly empowering fashion, often results in the charge that they are traditional conservatives or 'elitists'.

This is a charge typically levelled at the Frankfurt School, who laid much of the groundwork for contemporary critical theories. This is an accusation misapplied to those who are actually criticizing the ultimately conservative consequences of the pervasively and invasively commodified nature of mass-mediated social life despite its often superficial presentation as 'edgy' and counter-cultural. Ironically, a *paradox of conservatism* arises from the fact that the real conservatives are those cultural populists who act, either openly or inadvertently, as apologists for the deeply alienating and reactionary qualities of the mass media's output. Critical theories of media do not so much flatly deny the basic findings of cultural populism as argue that specific evidence of audience interpretive activity needs to be judged in terms of the deeper political significance of that activity. The brief, illustrative, examples below suggest that the desire of cultural populism to find evidence of audience empowerment risks, at best, gilding the evidentiary lily and, at worst, actually producing its own form of conservative and elitist values. A patronization of the masses

in a theoretical form of *noblesse oblige* occurs if the content consumed in mass culture tautologically becomes evidence of audience empowerment irrespective of its quality.

With due respect to O’Neil, only killjoys would object to cultural pleasure in and of itself, but a failure of intellectual duty takes place when theorists fail to point out when such pleasure becomes its own justification and vulnerable to excessive manipulation for profit and ideological ends – in the process excluding *any* other social considerations. The *critical* aspect of this book’s account of various media theories is repeatedly emphasized. It highlights and sympathetically reassesses those theories that are conventionally labelled and (unfairly) dismissed as somehow elitist for their stubborn insistence that popularity does not prove culture’s ultimate worth. Less obviously critical authors are reread for their generally under-acknowledged negative attributes. For example, Benjamin, Kracauer and McLuhan have all been viewed as predominantly optimistic interpreters of the positive cultural potential of mass-media technologies but there are strong reasons to re-evaluate this reputation.

The main difference between proponents of the culture industry thesis and cultural populists is their contrasting view of the framing function of the media. The Frankfurt School are accused of investing media with a malign agency, in other words, fetishizing the frame into an oppressive monolithic structure. The weakness of cultural populism, however, rests in the various theoretical over-compensations it makes in order to find examples of audience empowerment. These compensations take three main forms of argument:

- 1 The media frame is at worst neutral, and at best, positive
- 2 Inadvertently counterproductive evidence
- 3 The content of the frame is open to radical reinterpretation.

1 The media frame is at worst neutral, and at best, positive

In contrast to the culture industry’s perspective of the media frame as a negative circumscription of the public sphere, Scannell (1996) sees it as a predominantly neutral or even positive constitutive part of contemporary life. In a misleadingly selective reading of Heidegger that ignores his specific analyses of technology, the media’s pervasive and durable presence in the lives of the audience is claimed to provide a ‘world-disclosing’ function. In a similar vein, Couldry presents a neo-Durkheimian interpretation of media rituals (2003) and an enthusiastic account of the role of *visiting pilgrims* that soap fans adopt at the set of Coronation Street (2000). He non-ironically states that the programme has over its nearly forty year life

span, ‘offered a continuous fictional reality, operating in parallel to viewers’ lives. For some, it may serve as mnemonic system for events in their own life ... For such visitors ... visiting the set has a temporal depth connected not just with the programme’s history, but with their own lives’ (Couldry 2000: 76). In such readings, it is claimed that the media provides *mediation* for the inevitably large amount of para-social relations that exist in contemporary society and helps to ground them in the audience’s lived experience.

This process is viewed by cultural populists as predominantly positive – despite poor supporting evidence. The media’s construction of a whole realm of social discourse that provides much needed sense and orientation in the disorientating flux of mass-media society is, in terms of this book’s argument, part of the problem rather than a comforting solution. The central point made throughout this book is that à la Heidegger, Ellul, McLuhan et al., *technological form is itself content* and this form/content hybrid has disturbing *not* reassuringly constitutive powers. As Couldry himself acknowledges, ‘the media process does not merely interact with the rest of society; it has a major impact on how the rest of society understands and imagines itself’ (Couldry 2000: 54). Critical theory throws into sharp relief such concepts of empowerment as *media-pilgrims*, drawing as they do upon group-models that are more obeisant, gullible and pliable than meaningfully empowered.

2 *Inadvertently counterproductive evidence*

The misplaced optimism of uncritical media theorists is repeatedly revealed in the use of evidence that is frequently counterproductive and which critical theorists such as Adorno would be hard put to better as illustrative material for their own much darker critiques. Couldry (2000), for example, seeks to show how pilgrims to the actual site of media production sets are freshly empowered by the fillip a physical ‘seeing it with their own eyes’ provides for their deconstructive abilities. In making this argument, however, Couldry’s rich fieldwork material provides strong evidence of stubbornly disempowering attitudes. For example, there is the bathos/banality, of a mother and daughter’s dialogue subsequent to a purportedly enlightening tour of Granada Studios Coronation Street set:

- Mother: ... I just wish I could have met a star [...] or if I’d gone round a studio.
- Daughter: It’d be nice if somebody came up the Street and wandered around, one an hour, one an hour, one an hour, a different one every hour.
- Mother: Oh, it would have been lovely.

- Daughter: Just to see different people, probably not to talk to them, just to see them, walking up the Street, or around wherever we've been, yeah.
 Mother: Yeah, it would've been lovely.
- Daughter: Just to see one.

(Couldry 2000: 97)

Similarly, in an otherwise critically aware text, Inglis (1990) supportively cites Morley's attempt to document the empowering aspects of television in his work *Family Television* (1986). From a critical perspective, however, this attempt meets with limited success. Morley portrays a working-class patriarch who watches certain programmes to a tight regimen and assiduously videotapes any other programmes that clash. This is a man loathe to leave the private realm of his living room. He appears *avant la lettre* (ahead of his time) remarkably similar to the character Jim from the BBC series *The Royle Family*. Morley describes: 'the bottomless pit of this man's desire for programmes to watch' (Morley 1986: 71). Inglis, nevertheless, refers to him as 'a fascinating folk-figure' and claims that 'His unstoppable soliloquy must do here to suggest just how various are the needs and purposes working themselves out in audiences' (Inglis 1990: 154). In such misguidedly optimistic evaluations, we can see clear illustrations of a widespread risk that theorists bend over backwards not to see personifications of the culture industry thesis in their own subjects of enquiry. Indeed, ironically, it is likely that if material of the same tone was found in the work of culture industry theorists it would in all likelihood be rejected for its overly selective, exaggeratedly patronizing, and generally unrealistic depiction of alienated consumption. Inglis claims that Morley 'speaks up for and documents the sociable and sociable uses of television' (Inglis 1990: 153). This is an aim that is consistent with the cultural populism approach, but which in fact fails to take us far from a contemporary manifestation of Plato's Cave to the extent that: 'in going out to a public place this man experiences a loss of the total power which he has established within the walls of his own home' (Morley, cited in Inglis 1990: 153). Emblematic of cultural populism's lack of critical edge, borderline agoraphobia is represented as personal empowerment.

Further illustrations of counterproductive evidence of audience empowerment are evident in the work of Radway (1984) and Barker and Brooks (in Dickinson et al. 1998) and more recently Poster (2006) and Jenkins (2006a, 2006b). Radway's much cited study explored the purportedly empowering way in which women read Harlequin series romances. She argued that the act of carving out personal time to do this reading amongst the otherwise pressing demands of their families meant that the women were effectively resisting the patriarchally imposed, gendered roles conventionally

assigned to them. Barker and Brooks, meanwhile, attempt to find evidence of empowerment in the way fans consume the comics and 1995 film of *Judge Dredd*. Such approaches tend to overemphasize the extent to which such activities constitute 'empowerment' in any deeper sense as understood by critical theory. Little, if any, evidence is provided that cultural populism's version of empowerment involves the ability of the audience/media pilgrim to challenge or even question the fundamental nature of the media's structuring of their social conditions. Greater access to the sites of media production (Couldry 2000, 2003) or more *regulated pluralism* (Thompson 1995) in the ownership of the means of media production, will not solve the innately alienating features of the media framework itself. For example, Barker and Brooks fail to see the irony in their choice of the term *investment* to 'summarize all the ways in which audiences demonstrate strength of involvement to a social ideal of cinema' (Dickinson et al. 1998: 225). Although they openly acknowledge that: 'This concept of "investment" is a key one for us' (1998: 225), it appears much better suited to describing the deep overlapping of cultural values with a pervasively commodified cultural setting as set out in the culture industry thesis than it is to representing 'a social ideal'. Similarly, Jenkins and Poster's accounts focus upon the immersion of consumers within a commodity life-world with little recognition that this could be anything other than an ultimately liberating experience.

There may be a sense in which culture industry advocates and their opponents are arguing in parallel monologues. Those seeking to emphasize audience empowerment concentrate upon the ways in which a cultural commodity is consumed with various degrees of gusto, whereas culture industry theorists question that very gusto. For the Frankfurt School et al., the very consumption of a commodity is part of the underlying problem rather than a possible solution. Summarizing this debate Alasuutari suggests that active audience notions of consumption represent: 'a move away from the sphere of aesthetics to the political, or one could say that it politicizes the aesthetics of everyday life' (Alasuutari 1999: 11). This represents a *now* version of the similar *then* argument that, using very similar language, Benjamin makes for the positive potential of mass culture explored in detail in the next chapter. A perennial caricature of critical theory's position is that it represents an elitist defence of highbrow against lowbrow art. This is a misrepresentation that leads to the further misleading implication that the culture industry thesis is rooted in the aesthetic (rather than the political) because arguments against the cultural industry thesis are purported to represent 'a move away from' the aesthetic sphere. In fact, the opposite of Alasuutari's conclusion can be argued because the very

sample content of Critical Theories of Mass Media: Then and Now

- [click *Graphs and Matrices \(2nd Edition\) \(Universitext\) for free*](#)
- [read *Anatomy and Physiology: From Science to Life Hardcover \(3rd Edition\)*](#)
- [download *The Unpredictable Species: What Makes Humans Unique* pdf, azw \(kindle\), epub, doc, mobi](#)
- [click *Custody*](#)
- [read *Twister on Tuesday \(Magic Tree House, Book 23\)*](#)
- [*Tough Choices: A Memoir* pdf](#)

- <http://twilightblogs.com/library/Night-Fall--Neil-Paget--Book-10-.pdf>
- <http://twilightblogs.com/library/Anatomy-and-Physiology--From-Science-to-Life-Hardcover--3rd-Edition-.pdf>
- <http://aircon.servicessingaporecompany.com/?lib/The-Unpredictable-Species--What-Makes-Humans-Unique.pdf>
- <http://www.uverp.it/library/Classical-Music--Why-Bother---Hearing-the-World-of-Contemporary-Culture-Through-a-Composer-s-Ears.pdf>
- <http://crackingscience.org/?library/Twister-on-Tuesday--Magic-Tree-House--Book-23-.pdf>
- <http://diy-chirol.com/lib/Interspecies-Ethics.pdf>