Communications and Culture

In the age of satellite transmission and digital storage, postmodern art works and global art sales, all that is clear amid the confusion of voices is that old cultural assumptions no longer hold. The difficult distinctions now are not only those between high and low cultures but also those between state and market, national and multinational cultures. We can no longer assume clear boundaries between the various media themselves, as entertainment corporations absorb all forms of communication. We can't even refer confidently to specific publics or audiences or markets any more. Cultural assumption now means ever-shifting networks of taste, activity and enjoyment that are not easily correlated with the usual social categories of race or class, age or gender.

The new constituencies for cultural goods are also new constituencies for cultural theory. More than ever before it is possible now for new voices to be heard, for readers to be addressed in new ways, mobilised for new sorts of interest. Our purpose in short, is to develop the **Communications and Culture** series beyond the position cultural theory has currently reached in the academy. Mass culture and subculture, semiotics and psychoanalysis, reception and deconstruction, the familiar terms of communications and culture studies will be used as stepping stones to what is necessary: a reconstruction of popular culture as a public sphere. To this end we will be commissioning multi-disciplinary work on the most pressing issues of cultural policy and practice, namely, *cultural value*, *cultural politics* and *cultural identity*. These are not issues of interest only to the theorist. They concern the everyday lives of us all.

Rosalind Brunt • Simon Frith • Stuart Hall • Angela McRobbie

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In memory of Mary and Rosie Gertler

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Preface to the First Edition

This book is intended as an introduction to some of the central issues in the sociology of the arts, both for students of the arts and for students of sociology. It is not a textbook in the sociology of art, however, and it does not claim to be a comprehensive survey of the major developments and key figures in this field. Instead it pursues a couple of themes which seem to me to be particularly important in the study of culture. The primary focus is on the social nature of the arts, in their production, distribution and reception. A secondary issue which runs through the book is the problem of the author or the artist, and the question of how a sociological approach to the arts can conceptualise individual creativity, without depending on pre-sociological and mystifying notions of artist-as-genius. In some cases, particularly in the later chapters, the primary work I have called on is itself very complex, often obscure, and difficult to understand, and my exposition of it may consequently either remain fairly abstruse or fail to do it justice in attempting to simplify the ideas. However, I have tried to discuss these issues in reasonably simple terms, and to explain and present the material at an introductory level.

I would like to thank Michèle Barrett and Philip Corrigan for their careful reading of an earlier version of this book and their useful suggestions, as well as for the many discussions I have had with them over the past two or three years which have helped me develop my ideas. I would also like to thank Tony Bryant, Ahmed Gurnah, Stuart Hall, Dave Laing, Jim McGuigan and Griselda Pollock for their comments on the earlier draft, and Ruth M. Sweeney for her help in typing the final version. And lastly, I would like to thank Zygmunt Bauman and Bob Towler, both for their comments on this book and for their continued encouragement and support over the past six years.

Leeds

December 1979

Preface to the Second Edition

In preparing a new edition of this book, I decided against editing or re-writing. As I say in the new Afterword, if I were writing a book on this topic now, it would be likely to be rather different, in organisation and in content. It therefore became clear that it would be quite unsatisfactory to try to modify the text in minor ways. Instead, I have reviewed the book, chapter by chapter, in the Afterword, taking into account my own re-thinking on some of these issues as well as work which has been done in cultural studies and the sociology of the arts in the thirteen years since I wrote the book. In particular, I consider changes in academic disciplines (sociology, literary studies, cultural studies) and their implications for the project of a sociology of art; the relevance of post-structuralist theory for an understanding of the author/artist; the current (and, as I argue, mistaken) rejection of the concept of 'ideology'; the question of cultural politics in relation to debates about postmodernism; and the issue of 'identity politics', with regard to gender and ethnicity.

In raising these issues in the Afterword, I am to some extent critically reviewing the original text. Some of these criticisms (including criticisms made by reviewers of the book) raise important questions for a sociology of culture. In the end, though, my re-thinking has not led to a radical revision of the approach I develop here. In the belief that these are still important issues to explore in the project of the sociology of art, and that the Afterword does not negate the text, I leave the text unchanged – except in the sense that a later reading is bound to be different.

Rochester, New York
September 1992