

Mary Anne Staniszewski. *Believing is Seeing: Creating the Culture of Art*. New York and London: Penguin, 1995.

John Storey, ed. *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998.

Peter Wollen. *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema*. London: British Film Institute, 1969.



## Viewers Make Meaning 2

Images generate meanings. Yet, the meanings of a work of art or media image do not, strictly speaking, lie in the work itself where they were placed by the producer waiting for viewers to uncover them. Rather, meanings are produced through a complex social relationship that involves at least two elements besides the image itself and its producer: (1) how viewers interpret or experience the image and (2) the context in which an image is seen. Although images have what we call dominant or shared meanings, they can also be interpreted and used in ways that do not conform to these meanings.

It is important to recognize that works of art and media rarely “speak” to everyone universally. Rather, an image “speaks” to specific sets of viewers who happen to be tuned in to some aspect of the image, such as style, content, the world it constructs, or the issues it raises. When we say that an image speaks to us, we might also say that we recognize ourselves within the cultural group or audience imagined by the image. Just as viewers create meaning from images, images also construct audiences.

### Producers' intended meanings

Most if not all images have a meaning that is preferred by their producers. Advertisers, for example, conduct audience research to try to ensure that the meanings they want to convey about a particular product are the ones viewers will interpret in the product's advertisements. Artists, graphic designers, filmmakers, and other image producers create advertisements and many other images with the intent that we read them in a certain way. Analyzing images according to the intentions of their

producers, however, is rarely a completely useful strategy. We usually have no way of knowing for certain what a producer intended his or her image to mean. Furthermore, finding out a producer's intentions often does not tell us much about the image, since intentions may not match up with what viewers actually take away from an image or text. People often see an image differently from how it is intended to be seen, either because they bring experiences and associations to a particular image that were not anticipated by its producer, or because the meanings they derive are informed by the context (or setting) in which an image is seen. For example, we could say that the intentions of the producers of the many advertising images in an urban context such as this, may be seen by viewers in different ways. The visual clutter of the context alone may affect how viewers interpret these images, in addition to juxtapositions with other images. Many contemporary images, such as advertisements and television images, are viewed in a huge variety of contexts, each of which may affect their meaning. In addition, viewers themselves bring a particular set of cultural associations with them which will affect their individual interpretation of an image.

This does not mean that viewers wrongly interpret images, or that images are unsuccessful or fail to persuade viewers. Rather, meanings are created in part when, where, and by whom images are consumed, and not only when, where, and by whom they are produced. An artist or producer may make an image or media *text*, but he or she is not in full control of the meanings that



are subsequently seen in their work. Advertisers invest a lot of time and money in studying the impact of their advertisements on audiences precisely because they understand that they cannot have full control over the meanings their images will produce. Researching how different audiences interpret and use the images they encounter affords image producers a greater ability to anticipate received meanings; however, it will still not provide them with full control over the meaning of the image in various contexts and among different viewers.

Let us consider the following example. An episode of the syndicated hit television series *M\*A\*S\*H* is watched by a working-class teenager in a suburb of Detroit in his family's basement recreation room in 1976, and then by a middle-aged shopkeeper watching on a battery-operated television outside her open-air shop along the Amazon River in a village in Brazil ten years later. We can assume that the meanings each viewer takes away from the show vary. Yet neither viewer's interpretation of the show is more or less accurate than the other's. In both cases, meanings are affected by the social orientation of the viewer and by the context of viewing. Some of the factors that impact meaning in these two examples include the age, class, gender, and regional and cultural identity of the respective viewers; the political and social events in their respective worlds when the show airs; and the respective locations and time periods of the viewings in relation to the time of the show's original production. Though it was set during the Korean War, *M\*A\*S\*H* references events of the 1970s, in particular the Vietnam War, that would have a very different resonance for a US citizen during that same decade than for someone watching the show in Brazil a decade later.

As we discussed in Chapter 1, the interpretative work of *semiotics* shows us that the meaning of images changes according to different context, times, and viewers. Thus, we could say that the semiotic meaning of *M\*A\*S\*H* will change in different viewing contexts, that elements of the program will create different *signs*. Through this shift in focus, we can also see the importance of the perceived or received meanings of the viewer over that of the intended meaning of the producer. An image creates meaning in the moment that it is received by a viewer, and interpreted. Hence, we can say that meanings are not inherent in images. Rather, meanings are the product of a complex social interaction among image, viewers, and context. Dominant meanings—the meanings that tend to predominate within a given culture—emerge out of this complex social interaction.

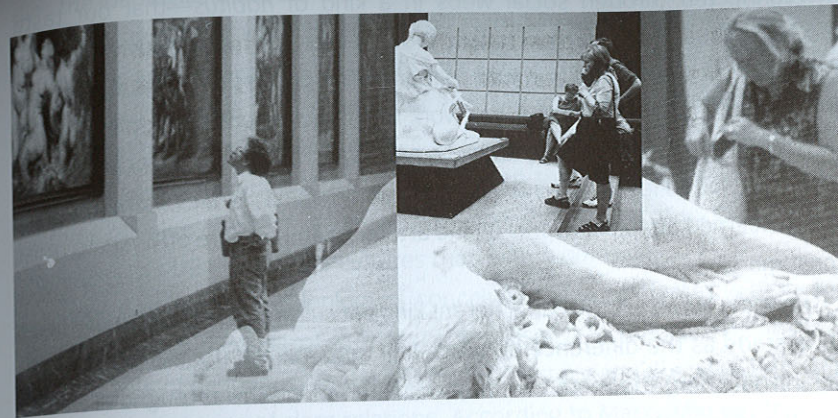
## Aesthetics and taste

All images are subject to judgement about their qualities (such as beauty) and their capacity to have an impact on viewers. The criteria used to interpret and give value to images depend upon cultural *codes*, or shared concepts, of what makes an image pleasing or unpleasant, shocking or banal, interesting or boring. As we explained above, these qualities do not reside in the image, but depend upon the contexts in which it is viewed, the codes that prevail in a society, and the viewer who is making that judgement. All viewer interpretations involve two fundamental concepts of value—*aesthetics* and *taste*.

Aesthetics usually refers to philosophical notions about the perception of beauty and ugliness. Philosophers have debated for centuries the question of whether such qualities are within the object itself or exist solely within the mind of the viewer. For instance, the eighteenth-century philosopher Immanuel Kant wrote that beauty can be seen as a category separate from judgement or subjectivity. Kant believed that pure beauty could be found in nature and art, and that it is universal rather than specific to particular cultural or individual codes. In other words, he felt that certain things inevitably and objectively are beautiful.

Today, however, the idea of aesthetics has moved away from the belief that beauty resides within a particular object or image. We no longer think of beauty as a universally accepted set of qualities. Contemporary concepts of aesthetics emphasize the ways that the criteria for what is beautiful and what is not are based on taste, which is not innate but rather culturally specific. The phrase “beauty is in the eye of the beholder” refers to this idea that the quality of beauty is dependent on individual interpretation.

Taste, however, is not just a matter of individual interpretation. Rather, taste is informed by experiences relating to one’s class, cultural background, education, and other aspects of identity. When we speak of taste, or say that someone “has taste,” we are usually using culturally specific and class-based concepts. When we say people have good taste we often mean that they participate and are educated in middle-class or upper-class notions of what is tasteful, whether or not they actually inhabit these class positions. Taste thus can be a marker of education and an awareness of elite cultural values. “Bad taste” is often regarded as a product of ignorance of what is deemed “quality” or “tasteful” within a society. Taste, in this understanding, is something that can be learned through contact with cultural institutions (art museums or



“tasteful” stores, for example) that instruct us in what is in good taste and what is not.

Notions of taste also provide the basis for the idea of *connoisseurship*. The image of a connoisseur evokes a “well-bred” person, most likely a “gentleman” who possesses “good taste” and knows the difference between a good work of art and a bad one. A connoisseur is considered to be an authority on beauty and aesthetics, who is more capable than others to pass judgement on the quality of cultural objects. This class-based notion of taste as a “discriminating” skill presents it as something that is natural to the connoisseur, rather than a skill learned through particular social and educational contexts. The idea of natural taste is a myth that masks the fact that taste is learned.

In the 1970s, French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu studied the responses of a range of French subjects to questions about taste. He concluded that taste is not inherent in particular people, but rather is learned through exposure to social and cultural institutions that promote certain class-based assumptions about correct taste. Institutions like museums function not only to educate people about the history of art, but to instill in them a sense of what is tasteful and what is not, what is “real” art and what is not. Through these institutions, working- and upper-class people alike learn to be “discriminating” viewers and consumers of images and objects. That is, they are able, regardless of their own class position, to rank images and objects according to a system of taste steeped in class-based values.

In Bourdieu’s theory, taste is a gatekeeping structure that enforces class boundaries. Bourdieu’s work has indicated ways in which all aspects of life are

interconnected through social webs in a kind of *habitus*—that our taste in art is related to our taste in music, food, fashion, furniture, movies, sports, and leisure activities, and is in turn related to our profession, class status, and educational level. Taste may often work to the detriment of people of lower classes because it relegates objects and ways of seeing associated with their lifestyles as less worthy of attention and respect. What's more, the very things deemed tasteful—works of fine art, for example—are off limits to most consumers.

These distinctions between different kinds of culture have traditionally been understood as the difference between *high* and *low culture*. As we noted in the Introduction, the most common definition of culture throughout history was the idea of the best of a given culture. This definition was highly class-based, with those cultural pursuits of the ruling class seen as high culture, and the activities of the working class as low culture. Thus, high culture meant fine art, classical music, opera, and ballet. Low culture was a term used for comic strips, television, and at least initially, for the cinema. However, in recent years, this division of high and low has not only been heavily criticized as upper-class snobbery, but as cultural categories undergo constant change, it has become much more difficult to uphold. The distinction between fine art and popular culture has been consistently blurred in the art movements of the late twentieth century, from *Pop Art* to styles of *postmodernism*. (We will discuss this work in Chapters 6 and 7.) In addition, the collection of certain kinds of cultural artifacts, such as *kitsch*, which are valued precisely because they once evoked “bad” taste, blurs any distinction between high and low. Furthermore, analyses of B movies and other cultural products such as popular romance novels that were once regarded as low culture have emphasized the impact and value of contemporary popular culture among specific communities and individuals, who interpret these texts to strengthen their communities or to challenge oppression. We cannot understand a culture without analyzing its production and consumption of all forms of culture, from high to low.

### Reading images as ideological subjects

Taste can be seen as a natural expression or logical extension of a culture's values and interests. We come to accept it unquestioningly. When something like taste is naturalized, it embod-

ies the *ideologies* of its context and time. As we discussed in Chapter 1, any time that something within a social and cultural context is perceived to be “natural” in some way, it is an aspect of ideology, since ideology defines ideas about how life should be. Because our lives are steeped in ideologies, which are often in tension with each other, it is easy not to recognize them as such. This is because societies function by masking their ideologies as “natural” systems of value or belief. As a consequence, it is easier for us to recognize ideologies of other times and cultures than within our own.

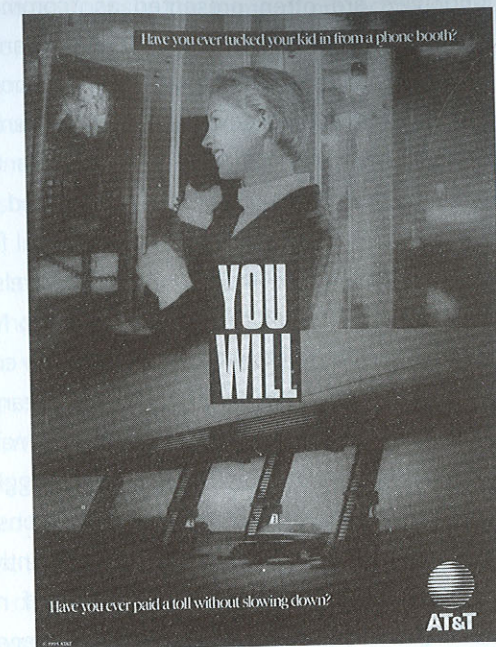
Much of the way that ideology is conceived today originates with its formulation in the theories of Karl Marx. Marxism is a theory that analyzes both the role of economics in the progress of history and the ways that capitalism works in terms of class relations. According to Marx, who wrote in the nineteenth century during the rise of industrialism and *capitalism* in the Western world, those who own the *means of production* are also in control of the ideas and viewpoints produced and circulated in a society's media venues. Thus, in Marx's terms, the dominant social classes that own or control the newspapers, and, since Marx's time, the television networks and the film industry, are able to control the content generated by these media forms. We will discuss Marx's ideas in relationship to the mass media and mass culture in Chapter 5, and his theories of capitalism in relation to consumer culture in Chapter 6. Here, we look at how Marx's ideas, and the ideas that they inspired in subsequent theorists, can help us understand how we interpret images as ideological *subjects*. Marx thought of ideology as a kind of *false consciousness* that was spread by dominant powers among the masses, who are coerced by those in power to mindlessly buy into the belief systems that allow industrial capitalism to thrive. Marx's idea of false consciousness, which has since been rejected by many theorists, emphasized the ways that people who are oppressed by a particular economic system, such as capitalism, are encouraged to believe in it anyway. Many now view his concept of ideology as overly totalizing and too focused on a top-down notion of ideology.

There have been at least two significant challenges to the traditional Marxist definition of ideology which have shaped subsequent theories about media culture and looking practices. One challenge came from the French Marxist theorist Louis Althusser in the 1960s. He insisted that ideology cannot be dismissed as a simple distortion of the realities of capitalism. Rather, he argued, “ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real

conditions of existence.”<sup>1</sup> Althusser moved the term “ideology” away from its association with false consciousness. For Althusser, ideology does not simply reflect the conditions of the world, whether falsely or not. Rather, it is the case that without ideology we would have no means of thinking about or experiencing that thing we call “reality.” Ideology is the necessary representational means through which we come to experience and make sense of reality.

Althusser’s modifications to the term “ideology” are crucial to visual studies because they emphasize the importance of *representation* (and hence images) to all aspects of social life, from the economic to the cultural. By the term “imaginary,” Althusser does not mean false or mistaken. Rather, he draws from *psychoanalysis* to emphasize that ideology is a set of ideas and beliefs, shaped through the *unconscious*, in relationship to other social forces, such as the economy and institutions. By living in society, we live in ideology. Althusser’s theories have been especially useful in film studies, where they helped theorists to analyze how media texts invite people to recognize themselves and identify with a position of authority or omniscience while watching films. In Chapter 3, we will discuss the importance of psychoanalysis to the study of image *spectators*.

Althusser stated that we are “hailed” or summoned by ideologies, which recruit us as their “authors” and their essential subject. By saying that ideologies speak to us and in the process recruit us as “authors,” he refers to the way that we become/are the subject that we are addressed as. This is called *interpellation*, which refers to a process by which we are constructed by the ideologies that speak to us every day through language and images. In Althusser’s terms, therefore, we are not so much unique individuals but rather we are “always already” subjects—spoken by the ideological discourses, into which we are born and are asked to find our place. In this light, images interpellate or hail us as viewers, and in so doing designate the kind of viewer they intend us to be. An overt example is this AT&T advertisement which asks its viewers, “Have you ever tucked your kid in from a phone booth? Have you ever paid a toll without slowing down? YOU WILL.” In this ad, viewers are spoken to directly. We are told with certainty what our lives will look like, in a narrative that speaks with determination about all technological change being about progress. For instance, we could ask, is tucking in one’s child from a phone booth a good thing?, but the advertisement does not. A particular kind of viewer is being constituted by this advertisement—someone who is a



professional, on the move, who values work over time. This advertisement speaks to viewers as if they all have access to a broad range of communication technologies. In doing so, it hails or interpellates all viewers into this social category.

Althusser’s concepts of ideology have been very influential, but they can be seen as very disempowering as well. If we are always already defined as subjects, and are interpellated to be who we are, then there is little hope for social change. In other words, the idea that we are already constructed as subjects does not allow us to feel that we have any agency in our lives. Another challenge to traditional concepts of ideology has emphasized that it is important for us to think in terms of ideologies in the plural. For example, the concept of a singular mass ideology makes it difficult to recognize how people in economically and socially disadvantaged positions really do challenge or resist dominant ideology. Long before Althusser, an Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci, had already introduced the concept of *hegemony* in place of the concept of domination in order to help us to think about this kind of *resistance*. Gramsci lived and wrote mostly during the 1920s and 1930s in Italy, but his ideas were taken up and became highly influential in the late twentieth century. There are two central aspects to Gramsci’s definition of hegemony: that dominant

ideologies are often presented as “common sense” and that dominant ideologies are in tension with other forces and constantly in flux.

The term “hegemony” emphasizes that power is not wielded by one class over another; rather, power is negotiated among all classes of people, who struggle with and against one another in the economic, social, political, and ideological arenas in which they live and work. Unlike domination, which is won by the ruling class through universal force, hegemony is constructed through the push and pull among all levels of a society over meanings, laws, and other aspects of a given society. No single class of people “has” hegemony; rather, hegemony is a state or condition of a culture arrived at through a negotiation or struggle over meanings, laws, and social relationships. Similarly, no one group of people ultimately “has” power; rather, power is a relationship within which classes struggle. One of the most important aspects of hegemony is that these relationships are constantly changing, hence dominant ideologies must constantly be reaffirmed in a culture precisely because the social existence of many people’s daily lives can work against it. It also allows for *counter-hegemonic* forces, such as political movements or subversive cultural elements, to emerge and to question the status quo of how things are. The concept of hegemony and the related term “negotiation” allow us to acknowledge the role that people may play in challenging the status quo and effecting social change in ways that may not favor the interests of the marketplace. Within visual studies, Gramsci’s concept of hegemony has been useful among critics who want to emphasize the role of image consumers in influencing the meanings and uses of popular culture in ways that do not benefit the interests of producers and the media industry.

How can Gramsci’s concept of hegemony and counter-hegemony help us to understand how people create and make meaning of images? Artist Barbara Kruger specializes in taking “found” photographic images and using text to give them ironic meanings. In this work, created in 1981, she takes the well-known image of the atomic bomb and works to change its ideological meaning. The image of an atomic bomb indicates a broad set of ideologies, from the spectacle of high technology to anxiety about its tremendous capacity to destroy, which depend on the context in which the image is viewed. It could be argued that the bomb itself and images of it are indicative of a particular set of ideological assumptions that emerged from the Cold War about the rights of nations to build destructive weapons and the so-called “need” to

create more and more destructive weapons in the name of protecting one’s country. In the 1940s and 1950s, an image of the bomb was thus likely to uphold many ideas about the primacy of Western science and technology and the role of the United States and the USSR as superpowers. By the end of the twentieth century, however, it is most likely that this image would represent a cautionary reflection on the destructive weapons that exist throughout the world.

Kruger uses text in this image to comment upon these ideological assumptions about Western science. Who is the “you” of this image? We could say that Kruger is speaking to those with power, perhaps those who helped to create the atomic bomb and those who approved it. But she is also speaking in a larger sense to the “you” of Western science and philosophy, that allows a maniacal idea (bombing people) to acquire the validation of rational science. In this work, the image is awarded new meaning through the bold, accusatory statement spread across it. Here, the text dictates the meaning of the image, and provokes the viewer, in often oblique ways, to look at it differently. Kruger’s work functions as a counter-hegemonic statement about the dominant ideology of science.



Barbara Kruger, *Untitled*, 1981

People use systems of representation to experience, interpret, and make sense of the conditions of their lives both as image-makers and as viewers. In essence, we construct ideological selves through a network of representations—many of them visual—that includes television, film, photography, popular magazines, art, and fashion. Media images and popular culture interpellate us as viewers, defining within their mode of address, style of presentation, and subject matter the ideological subjects to whom they speak, yet we also negotiate that process ourselves.

It is important, when thinking about ideologies and how they function, to keep in mind the complicated interactions of powerful systems of belief and the things that very different kinds of viewers bring to their experiences. If we give too much weight to the idea of a dominant ideology, we risk portraying viewers as cultural dupes who can be “force fed” ideas and values. At the same time, if we overemphasize the potential array of interpretations viewers can make of any given image, we can make it seem as if all viewers have the power to interpret images any way they want, and that these interpretations will be meaningful in their social world. In this perspective, we would lose any sense of dominant power and its attempt to organize our ways of looking. Meanings of images are created in a complex relationship among producer, viewer, image or text, and social context. Because meanings are produced out of this relationship, there are limits to the interpretive agency of any one member of this group.

### Encoding and decoding

Images present to viewers clues about their dominant meaning. A dominant meaning can be the interpretation that an image's producers intended viewers to make. More often, though, it can be the meaning that most viewers within a given cultural setting will arrive at, regardless of the producers' intentions. All images are both *encoded* and *decoded*. An image or object is encoded with meaning in its creation or production; it is further encoded when it is placed in a given setting or context. It is then decoded by viewers when it is consumed by them. These processes work in tandem. So, for instance, a television show is encoded with meaning by the writers, producers, and the production apparatus that allows it to be made, and it is then decoded by television viewers according to their particular set of cultural assumptions and their viewing context.

Stuart Hall has written that there are three positions that viewers can take as decoders of cultural images and artifacts:

- (1) *Dominant-hegemonic reading*. They can identify with the hegemonic position and receive the dominant message of an image or text (such as a television show) in an unquestioning manner.
- (2) *Negotiated reading*. They can negotiate an interpretation from the image and its dominant meanings.
- (3) *Oppositional reading*. Finally, they can take an oppositional position, either by completely disagreeing with the ideological position embodied in an image or rejecting it altogether (for example, by ignoring it).<sup>2</sup>

Viewers who take the dominant-hegemonic position can be said to decode images in a relatively passive manner. But it can be argued that few viewers actually consume images in this manner, because there is no mass culture that can satisfy all viewers' culturally specific experiences, memories, and desires. The second and third positions, negotiation and opposition, are more useful to us and deserve further explanation.

The term “negotiation” invokes the process of trade. We can think of it as a kind of bargaining over meaning that takes place among viewer, image, and context. We use the term “negotiation” in a metaphorical sense to say that we often “haggle” with the dominant meanings of an image when we interpret it. The process of deciphering an image always takes place at both the conscious and unconscious levels. It brings into play our own memories, knowledge, and cultural frameworks as well as the image itself and the dominant meanings that cling to it. Interpretation is thus a mental process of acceptance and rejection of the meanings and associations that adhere to a given image through the force of dominant ideologies. In this process, viewers actively struggle with dominant meanings, allowing culturally and personally specific meanings to transform and even override the meanings imposed by producers and broader social forces. The term “negotiation” allows us to see how cultural interpretation is a struggle in which consumers are active meaning-makers and not merely passive recipients in the process of decoding images.

Let us take, for example, the television show *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*, which has versions in many countries and is based on the premise that any ordinary person can win large amounts of money with the proper amount of trivial knowledge and luck. The show stages a spectacle of both desire and

greed, and is encoded by its producers with the meaning that we all desire large amounts of money. The show aims to create the fantasy for viewers that they too could win. A dominant hegemonic reading of the show would agree with its encoded values that money increases one's happiness and social status and that any viewer could potentially be on the show and win. However, the show has come under fire, even while it is immensely popular, for representing crass commercialism and the further debasement of mainstream popular culture. Many viewers have thus engaged in a negotiated reading of the show, so that even while they may enjoy watching it, they see it as an indicator of what's wrong with contemporary culture. Furthermore, the show has been criticized for equating knowledge with trivia. An oppositional reading might read the show critically as an example of how capitalism creates the impression that everyone has equal potential to succeed when in fact it is fundamental to the structure of capitalism that only some can accede to power and wealth. An oppositional reading might note, for instance, how the American version of the show has been criticized for having mostly white male contestants, thereby reflecting the structures of privilege in society.

To varying degrees, all cultures are in flux and constantly in the process of being reinvented through cultural representations. This is in part an effect of the economics and ideologies of the free market, which demand that participants negotiate not only to trade in goods, services, and capital, but to produce meaning and value in the objects and representations of cultural products. Hence conflicting ideologies coexist in tension. There is a constant reworking of hegemonic structures, which allows both for contradictory ideological messages and new, potentially subversive messages produced through culture products. At the same time, semiotics shows us that viewers create meaning from images, objects, and texts, and that meanings are not fixed within them. Most images we see are caught up in dominant ideologies, however, the value of negotiation as an analytic concept is that it allows space for the different subjectivities, identities, and pleasures of audiences.

### **Appropriation and oppositional readings**

Of the three different modes of engagement with popular culture defined by Stuart Hall (dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional), the category of oppositional

readings raises perhaps the most complicated set of questions. What does it mean to read a television show in an oppositional way? Why does this matter? Does it make any difference that viewers may often read against the intended meaning of an image? The lone oppositional reading of a single viewer may mean nothing compared to the popularity of a particular cultural product. This consideration raises the important issue of power: Whose readings matter? Who ultimately controls the meanings of a given image or text? There are many ways that oppositional readings of popular culture demonstrate the complicated dance of power relations in contemporary societies, the tension of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forces. The constant dynamic of culture comes in part from the ongoing exchange among dominant, negotiated, and oppositional practices.

While the advent of a broad array of computer technologies, the Internet, and home video cameras has meant that many more people have access to the technical equipment to produce images and cultural products, the fact remains that the vast amount of cultural production and image production is done through the entertainment and business industries. Hence, the primary engagement of the average citizen with everyday images is through viewership, not production. However, as we stated before, viewers are not simply passive recipients of the intended message of public images and cultural products such as films and television shows. They have a variety of means to engage with images and make meaning from them. This negotiation with popular culture is referred to as "the art of making do," a phrase that implies that while viewers may not be able to change the cultural products they observe, they can "make do" by interpreting, rejecting, or reconfiguring the cultural texts they see. As stated earlier, an oppositional reading can also take the form of dismissal or rejection—turning off the TV set, declaring boredom, or turning the page. But it can also take the form of making do with, or making a new use for, the objects and artifacts of a culture. This process is called *appropriation*. Appropriation can be a form of oppositional production and reading, although it is not always so. The term "appropriation" is traditionally defined as taking something for oneself without consent. To appropriate is, in essence, to steal. Cultural appropriation is the process of "borrowing" and changing the meaning of cultural products, slogans, images, or elements of fashion.

Cultural appropriation has been used quite effectively by artists seeking to make a statement that opposes the dominant ideology. A good example is the



## READ MY LIPS



Gran Fury, *Read My Lips (girls)*, 1988

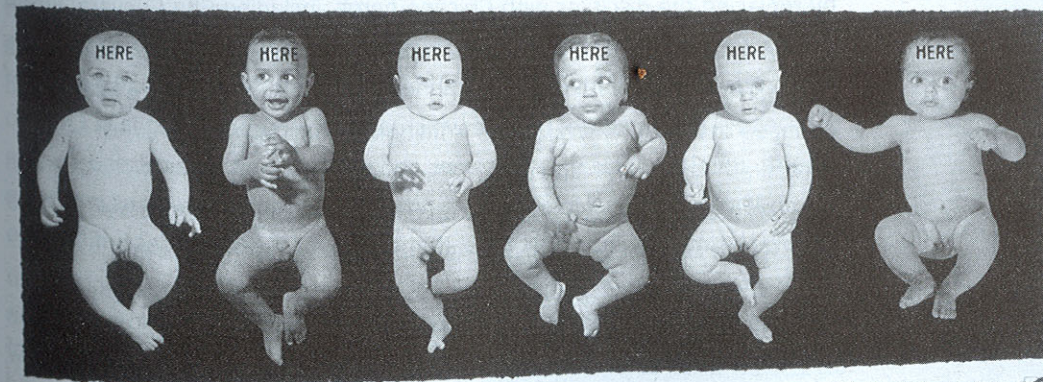
public art of Gran Fury, an art collective (named after the Plymouth car used by undercover police) that produced posters, performances, installations, and videos alerting people to facts about AIDS and HIV that public health officials refused to publicize. One of their posters advertised a 1988 demonstration, a “kiss in” intended to publicly dispel the myth that kissing transmits the AIDS virus. The phrase “read my lips,” which refers to the poster’s image of two women about to kiss, was appropriated from a much-discussed slogan in the presidential campaign of then President George Bush. Bush’s slogan “read my lips, no new taxes” was in turn a reference to former President Ronald Reagan’s appropriation of actor Clint Eastwood’s famous phrase, “Make my day.” In “lifting” the phrase “read my lips” and placing it with images about homosexual contact, Gran Fury suggested that the phrase had meanings that Bush and his campaign advisors clearly did not intend. Gran Fury’s appropriation gives the poster a biting political humor, making it both a playful twist of words and an accusation against a president who was overtly homophobic and helped to lead a tragic political denial of the seriousness of the AIDS epidemic.

Strategies of appropriation, borrowing, and changing or reconfiguring images have proliferated in contemporary image-making processes. Barbara

Kruger’s work, *Your Manias Become Science*, which we discussed earlier, is an example of such strategies, in which the original image of the atomic bomb is reconfigured by Kruger through her use of text. One could argue that Kruger is also appropriating the techniques of advertisers to make her statement, in effect using the technique of the slogan to create a new meaning. Such juxtapositions of text and image are often used in public service advertisements to create messages that work against viewer expectations. In this public service ad, for example, the viewer may come to the image with the expectation that it is an ad selling some baby products, only to learn, by reading the text in the image, that it is a statement about the omnipresence of racism. Thus, appropriating the techniques of a particular style of conventional images can create an oppositional statement.

Sometimes, appropriation can function as a means of reworking art history itself. One of the most well-known biblical motifs in the history of art is the story of Christ’s last supper, a scene most famously painted by Leonardo da Vinci in 1484. Da Vinci’s *The Last Supper* depicts Christ and his disciples sitting at a long table and is a universally recognized icon of Christian history and religion. This image was appropriated by pop artist Andy Warhol at the end of his career as the basis of a dozen monumental paintings. Warhol used tracings from projections of the da Vinci painting and silkscreen techniques to reproduce the image in fragmented, multiple, and vastly enlarged formats. Mural

# THERE ARE LOTS OF PLACES IN BRITAIN WHERE RACISM DOESN'T EXIST.



COMMISSION FOR RACIAL EQUALITY



José Antonio Burciaga,  
*The Last Dinner of  
 Chicano Heros*, 1986–89

artist José Antonio Burciaga also reworked *The Last Supper* in the late 1980s by replacing the disciples with Chicano heroes, including Che Guevara, Emilio Zapata, Cesar Chavez, and Dolores Huerta. Using the religious symbols of the Virgin Guadalupe (draped with a banner that reads “America”) and a Day of the Dead skeleton figure, both of which are very important icons in Chicano culture, Burciaga makes a statement about ethnic and political pride within the codes of traditional images. In appropriating a famous religious image, he endows his mural with a political statement about the importance of Chicano culture.

These examples show oppositional practices that involve cultural production. However, oppositional practices can also be about the consumption of

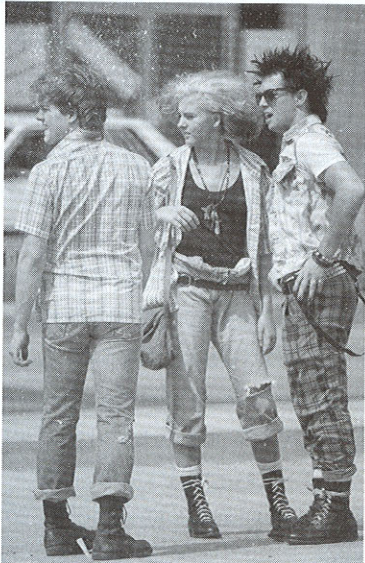
images. As viewers, we can appropriate images and texts (films, television shows, news images, and advertisements), strategically altering their meanings to suit our purposes. As we explained earlier, however, meanings are determined through a complex negotiation among viewers, producers, texts, and contexts. Hence images themselves can be said to resist the oppositional readings that some viewers may wish to confer to them. In other words, meanings that oppose the dominant reading of an image may not “cling” to an image with the same tenacity as meanings that are more in line with dominant ideologies.

One example of oppositional looking is the technique of reading lesbian or gay subtexts in movies that feature *gender-bending* (bending the traditional codes of gender roles and sexual norms) performances or same-sex friendships. Films starring Greta Garbo, a well-known film star of the 1920s and 1930s, for example, have a cult following among lesbian viewers interested in appropriating Garbo’s sometimes gender-bending performances for the under-considered history of lesbian and gay film culture. In the film *Blonde Venus* (1932), Garbo, who was an icon of glamour in her time, plays a nightclub performer who dresses in a man’s tuxedo and kisses another woman. While this may have been understood as a theatrical gesture at the time, this film is now reread as a depiction of lesbian desire. Another example of oppositional viewing is the affirmation of qualities within genres previously regarded as exploitative or insulting to a group. The blaxploitation film genre, for example, has been widely noted for its negative representations of Black culture during the 1970s, with such stereotypes as the black male stud, gangster, and pimp. Yet, more recently, this genre has been reconsidered to emphasize the evidence these films provide of valuable aspects of Black culture and talent during the 1970s. We can say, then, that this genre has been appropriated, its meanings strategically transformed to create an alternative view of black culture.

These forms of appropriation for political empowerment can also be found at the level of language. Social movements often take terms that are considered to be derogatory and re-use them in empowering ways. This process is called *trans-coding*. In recent years, the term “queer,” which was traditionally used to insult gays, has been trans-coded as a cultural identity to be embraced and proudly declared. Similarly, in the 1960s, the phrase “Black is beautiful” was used by the civil rights and black power movements as a means to

reappropriate the term “black” and change its meaning from a negative to a positive one.

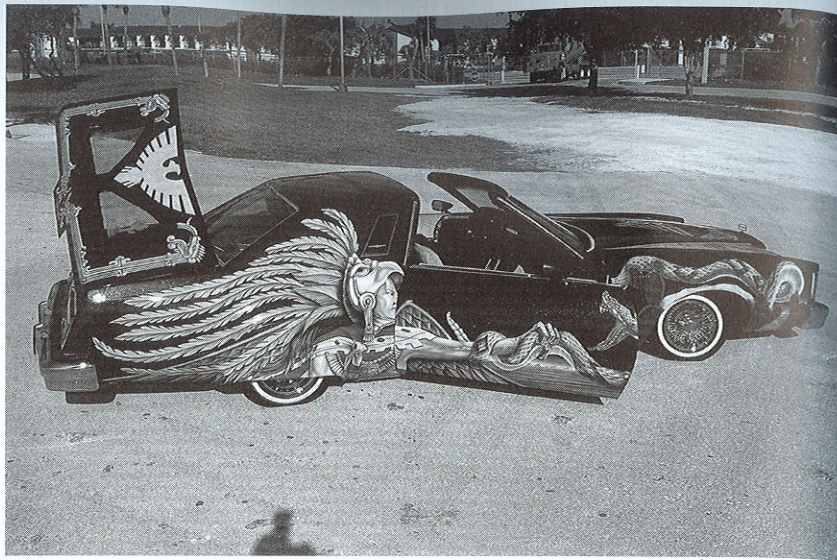
One of the terms used to describe tactics of appropriation is *bricolage*, which literally means “making do” or piecing together one’s culture with whatever is at hand. The term was derived from the ideas of anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss by a number of cultural theorists, including Dick Hebdige.<sup>3</sup> The idea of consumers of popular culture “making do” with given elements of a culture seems inevitable, given that most consumers typically have relatively little influence on the production of art, media, and fashion. Hebdige has argued that bricolage can be seen as a deliberate tactic to appropriate commodities in the construction of youth style. For instance, many youth *subcultures* appropriate particular fashion styles and, through bricolage, change the meaning of particular articles of clothing or styles of dress. A subculture is a group that defines its distinction from mainstream culture through various aspects of its style—dress, music, lifestyle, etc. A baseball cap turned backwards, a pair of oversized Carhart jeans worn very low, a lace gothic dress worn with Doc Martens boots—these are all elements of styles assembled by participants in various youth subcultures which appropriate various elements and “found” items and alter their meanings. Doc Martens boots, for example, were originally created in the 1940s as orthopedic boots and sold in Britain in the 1960s as work boots, but were appropriated to become key



elements in various subcultures from the 1970s onwards, such as punk, AIDS activism, neopunk, and grunge. The Carhart brand of denim clothing, also originating as blue-collar work gear, became popular among youth favoring the hip-hop look during the 1990s. Cultural theorist Angela McRobbie has examined the ways that the “ragmarket” of used clothing allows young people to create new styles by mining styles of the past. McRobbie argues that women have played a central role as both entrepreneurial street sellers and as consumers in fostering complex styles of retro fashion, the appropriation of work clothes, and the use of men’s clothing such as formal dress suits and long underwear (as leggings) to create styles that were then appropriated by mainstream fashion.

For participants in subcultures, the remaking of style through appropriation of historical objects and images can be a political statement about class and cultural identity. Many young people assert their defiance of mainstream culture specifically by developing styles that do not conform to the “good taste” of white mainstream culture. These styles can include dress, music, dance, and other cultural forms, often working together. Chicano low-riders, for instance, enact style with their cars, which are named and decorated with paintings of Mexican figures and history, remodeled to both rise up and drive slowly, and refashioned like living spaces. As cultural theorist George Lipsitz notes, the low-rider car defies utilitarianism, it is about cruising for display, codes of ethnic pride, and defying mainstream car culture. He writes, “Low riders are themselves masters of postmodern cultural manipulation. They juxtapose seemingly inappropriate realities—fast cars designed to go slowly, ‘improvements’ that flaunt their impracticality, like chandeliers instead of overhead lights. They encourage a bi-focal perspective—they are made to be watched but only after adjustments have been made to provide ironic and playful commentary on prevailing standard of automobile design.”<sup>4</sup> We will discuss postmodern style at length in Chapter 7. Here, we would like to note the ways that low-riders change the meanings of automobiles so that they function as a cultural and political statement.

Subculture style, according to Hebdige, signals a defiance among youth against a homogeneous culture—that is, a culture that tries to unify its members, or make them conform to the stylistic norms of white, upper- and middle-class culture. As we explained at the beginning of this chapter, the concept of taste is tacitly based on a value system that valorizes the tastes of the middle and upper classes. What some members of society may perceive



Jorge and Rosa Salazar,  
Azteca, low rider car

as being “in bad taste” may in fact be a strategic assault on the normative values inherent in “tasteful” fashions.

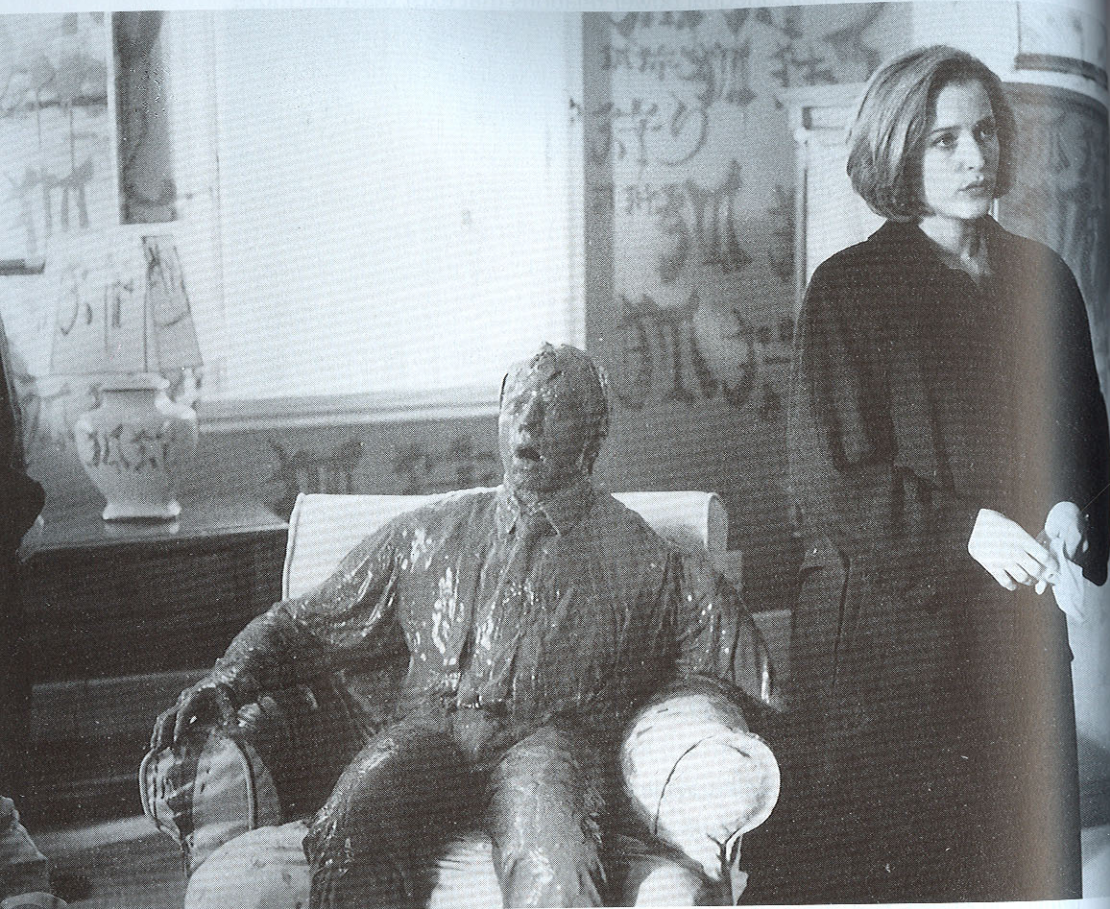
In relationship to cultural texts, such as literature, film, and television, bricolage can be seen as a reconfiguring of the meaning of the text. This strategy is called *textual poaching* by literary and cultural theorist Michel de Certeau. Textual poaching was defined by de Certeau as a process analogous to inhabiting a text “like a rented apartment.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, viewers of popular culture can “inhabit” that text by negotiating meanings through it and creating new cultural products in response to it, making it their own. While the idea of textual poaching can be seen as allied with Stuart Hall’s formulation of three readings (dominant, negotiated, and oppositional), it is a more fluid and less fixed process. De Certeau saw reading texts and images as a series of advances and retreats, of tactics and games. Readers can fragment and reassemble texts (with as simple a strategy as a television remote control) as a form of cultural bricolage.

De Certeau saw the relationship of readers/writers and producers/viewers as an ongoing struggle for possession of the text—a struggle over its meaning and potential meanings. This notion operates in opposition to the educational training that teaches readers to search for the author’s intended meanings and to leave a text unmarked by their own fingerprints, so to speak. However, this

is a process steeped in the unequal power relations that exist between those who produce dominant popular culture and those who consume it. De Certeau defined *strategies* as the means through which institutions exercise power and set up well-ordered systems that consumers must negotiate (the programming schedule of television, for instance), and *tactics* as the “hit and run” acts of random engagement by viewers/consumers to usurp these systems, which might include everything from using a remote control to change the “text” of television to creating a web site that analyzes a particular film or TV show.

De Certeau’s ideas have been used to examine the ways that viewers engage in various negotiated and oppositional tactics with popular culture. Some of this work of textual poaching is at the level of interpretation, and some of it is about cultural production, actually producing new texts out of old, say, by re-editing films or writing stories that feature well-known television characters. Some contemporary theorists have looked at the cultural labor of fan cultures as an example of poaching.<sup>6</sup> Many fan cultures are active in discussions about certain television shows, engage in speculation about show scripts, post reviews, write their own scripts, and consider themselves more authoritative about the shows than the producers themselves.

The television show *The X-Files* inspired an active fan culture that writes magazines, speculates about the show’s various plots, discusses the show on line, and reworks various episodes. Many fan cultures have emerged around television shows that are suggestive yet not explanatory about the larger world of their drama, such as the series *Star Trek*, which indicates many other civilizations that fans are then compelled to create themselves. Similarly, the plot of *The X-Files* is highly complex, involving many unexplained incidents and characters. This show is deliberately designed to suggest rather than explain many elements of its story, hence it is open to a variety of interpretations. Many of these plot elements require repeat (VCR) viewing, which is a serious fan activity. The show is thus a remarkably loose cultural text that allows for many levels of engagement, of which ritualistic weekly viewing is only one. Many fans interact with the series through the textual poaching activities of actively engaging in weekly critiques of episodes, participating in web site discussions about unresolved aspects of the plot, and rewriting episodes to their liking.



The X-Files

### Re-appropriations and counter-bricolage

However, appropriation is not always an oppositional practice. Active viewer/reader engagement can also work in ways that are in sync with dominant culture. Television fans may sometimes be reading the show against the intended meaning of its producers, but as active and loyal fans, they also form a lucrative market for it. In the case of *The X-Files*, the producers regularly monitor fan activity and often put clues in episodes that are intended only for the fan viewer who is paying close attention.

In addition, the vintage thrift store clothing fashions originally associated with oppositional youth culture were, in turn, re-appropriated by the mainstream fashion industry, which capitalized on the market for inexpensive and

widely available knock-offs of vintage fashions. Whereas Doc Martens work boots in the early 1990s might have signaled an association with AIDS activism or the values of neopunk culture, within a few years they had become respectable everyday shoes for a wide range of consumers, bearing no clear political significance beyond being somewhat fashionable.

The relationship of viewers of mainstream popular culture and the industries that produce them is a highly complex exchange. While cultural bricolage and fan tactics on the part of viewers might offer resistant practices to dominant hegemonic readings of cultural products, it can also be said that hegemonic forces in these industries re-appropriate the tactics of marginalized cultures into the mainstream—a form of *counter-bricolage*. We could think of this as the way in which advertisers and fashion designers have become highly skilled at designing and packaging the style of various subcultures and selling them back to the mainstream public. The mainstreaming of rap music is another example. Whereas rap began in defiance of the music industry and popular music, it soon became immensely popular and widely appropriated. As particular rap styles become part of the mainstream, new forms of music emerge at the margins in order to redefine its defiance. This means that culture industries are constantly establishing what is new style, and that subcultures on the margins are always reinventing themselves.

This is, in many ways, how hegemony works, with the dominant culture in constant flux as it works in tension with marginal cultures. It is also the case that since the 1960s, marketers have been actively working to associate the meaning of “cool” with their products.<sup>7</sup> Since marketers began to borrow the concepts of the counterculture of the 1960s to sell products as youthful and hip, there has been a constant mining of youth cultures and marginal subcultures for mainstream fashion and other products.

Cultural meaning is thus a highly fluid, ever-changing thing, the result of complex interactions among images, producers, cultural products, and readers/viewers/consumers. The meaning of images emerges through these processes of interpretation, engagement, and negotiation. Culture is a process, in a constant state of flux. Furthermore, the marketing of the qualities of hipness and cool means that the categories of high and low culture are not only inappropriate class-based distinctions, they are very difficult to discern. When the culture of youth on the street is marketed to middle- and upper-class consumers, and the culture of inner-city ethnic subcultures is marketed to white consumers with the promise of conferring hipness, then we

can see how mainstream culture, through the processes of hegemony and counter-hegemony, is constantly mining the margins of culture for meaning.

## Notes

1. Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," from *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, translated by Ben Brewster (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 162.
2. Stuart Hall, "Encoding, Decoding," in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, edited by Simon During (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 90–103.
3. Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (New York and London: Routledge, 1979), 102–04.
4. George Lipsitz, "Cruising around the Historical Bloc," in *The Subcultures Reader*, edited by Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 358.
5. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, translated by Steven Rendall (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1984), p. xxi.
6. See in particular work by Henry Jenkins and Constance Penley on the television series *Star Trek*: Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992); and Constance Penley, *NASA/Trek: Popular Science and Sex in America* (New York and London: Verso, 1997).
7. See Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

## Further Reading

- Louis Althusser. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." In *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Translated by Ben Brewster. New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1971, 127–86.
- Bad-Object Choices. *How Do I Look? Queer Film and Video*. Seattle: Bay Press, 1991.
- Pierre Bourdieu. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Translated by Richard Nice. Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1984.
- Michel de Certeau. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Translated by Steven Rendall. Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1984.
- Alexander Doty. *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.
- Terry Eagleton, ed. *Ideology*. New York and London: Longman Press, 1994.
- John Fiske. *Reading Popular Culture*. New York and London: Routledge, 1989.
- Thomas Frank. *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998.
- Antonio Gramsci. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith. New York: International Publishers and London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971.
- Stuart Hall. "Encoding, Decoding," in *The Cultural Studies Reader*. Edited by Simon During. New York and London: Routledge, 1993, 90–103.
- "The Problem of Ideology: Marxism Without Guarantees." In *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*. Edited by David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen. New York and London: Routledge, 1996, 25–46.
- "Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity." In *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*. Edited by David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen. New York and London: Routledge, 1996, 411–40.

- Dick Hebdige. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. New York and London: Routledge, 1979.
- Henry Jenkins. *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. New York and London: Routledge, 1992.
- George Lipsitz. "Cruising around the Historical Bloc: Postmodernism and Popular Music in East Los Angeles." In *The Subcultures Reader*. Edited by Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton. New York and London: Routledge, 1997, 350–59.
- Angela McRobbie. "Second-Hand Dresses and the Role of the Ragmarket." In *Postmodernism and Popular Culture*. New York and London: Routledge, 1994, 135–54.
- Constance Penley. *NASA/TREK: Popular Science and Sex in America*. New York and London: Verso, 1997.
- Sally Price. *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago, 1989.
- Janice Radway. *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Culture*. Revised Edition. Chapel Hill, NC and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1991.