SOCIOLOGY FOR A NEW CENTURY

FOURTH EDITION

CULTURES AND SOCIETIES IN A CHANGING WORLD

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This book is printed on acid-free paper.

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The Production, Distribution, and Reception of Culture

M any Americans and Canadians proudly display Eskimo soapstone carvings in their living rooms.[1] Rounded, polished, and smooth to the touch, these miniature sculptures of polar bears, seals, and fur-wrapped children adorn any number of urban middle-class homes thousands of miles from the Arctic. The carvings seem profoundly natural, the innocent, simple renditions of what the Eskimos see around them. By now, of course, readers of this book have learned to be wary of anything referred to as "natural." The sociological approach to culture maintains that practices or objects that seem natural, even inevitable, are not. Like Marx's cherry tree, they have a history embedded in social relations—as do the soapstone carvings.

According to anthropologist Nelson Grayburn (1967), military men stationed in the far north during World War II and other visitors noticed the Eskimo penchant for carving or whittling. The Eskimos looked on this activity as making toys, not art, doing something to amuse the children and pass the time during the dark months of an Arctic winter. An entrepreneurial Canadian artist named James Houston saw something else in these little carvings—namely, the appeal they would have for non-Eskimo viewers and buyers in the cities to the south. With the encouragement of the Canadian Department of Northern Affairs (now called Indian and Northern Affairs Canada), which was responsible for the Eskimos' welfare, Houston set up a system of production for the market he had so astutely identified.

At first there were problems. Because the Eskimos worked with extremely hard materials such as ivory and bone, carving took a long time. Ivory, moreover, was increasingly rare. These things hardly mattered when the carvers were producing for their own amusement, but the organizers from down south and their marketing outlets in lower Canada and the United States were spiritual heirs of Benjamin Franklin— "Time is money"—and the leisurely rhythms and small quantities of craft production did not fit their requirements. They convinced the Eskimos to work in soapstone, both readily available and easy to carve, so they could turn out the finished carvings more quickly.

The content as well as the materials of these carvings required some regulation. When Eskimo inmates in a tuberculosis hospital decided to make some money with their carving, they turned out sculptures of American cars and kangaroos, causing another course correction. The entrepreneurs destroyed these carvings and impressed on the carvers that the customers in Toronto and New York seeking "real" Eskimo art wanted seals and bears, not kangaroos. No doubt bemused by what the white people in warm climates found interesting, the Eskimos dutifully turned out the roly-poly animals as required. Encouraged to fashion figures from their traditional religious mythology, carvers in another Eskimo community happily obliged even though they had been devout Anglicans for generations.

Just as the entrepreneur had envisioned, the carvings caught on and found their market. The same system of production and distribution remains today. The Eskimos got a new source of income, the gallery owners in Canadian and American cities got their percentage, the entrepreneurs made money, and coffee tables from Winnipeg to Atlanta display fat little seals that their owners assume to be traditional folk art. Local crafts deemed "authentic" can often find global markets (Wherry 2008).

This story demonstrates our previous suggestion: Cultural objects are not simply the "natural" products of some social context but are produced, distributed, marketed, received, and interpreted by a variety of people and organizations. This kind of self-conscious production, marketing, and distribution system applies to ideas as much as tangible cultural objects. During the years leading up to the Iranian revolution, the Ayatollah Khomeini taped speeches propounding his brand of fundamentalist Islam during his exile in Paris. His followers smuggled the tapes into Iran, and the faithful secretly listened to them on cassette players. International broadcasters similarly package ideas and frame news events and then distribute them throughout the world.

In this chapter, we explore the production and distribution of culture, from ideologies to mass consumer culture. We have already glimpsed some

of these processes—recall Bessie Smith with her "race records," touring companies, and newly created Northern audiences—and now we take a closer look at the organizations and processes whereby cultural objects move beyond their creators to those who ultimately experience, consume, and interpret them. We start with the production-of-culture school of cultural analysis. The chapter then proceeds to a discussion of audiences and cultural reception in which we consider the implications of the fact that the receivers of a cultural object come to it not as blank slates but as people conditioned by their cultural and social experiences. Finally, we look at two opposing interpretations of the production-reception link: the pessimistic view of the "mass culture" theorists and the more optimistic view held by scholars of "popular culture."

The Production of Culture

Many sociologists believe it is insufficient simply to point out, following Durkheim or Marx, that culture is a collective product. We need to understand just how culture—and the cultural objects that compose a culture—is produced; moreover, we need to learn what impact the means and processes of production have on cultural objects themselves. This type of analysis came out of industrial and organizational sociology during the early 1970s, when sociologists trained in industrial sociology, systems analysis, and economic analyses of business firms began applying their models to cultural production.

This production-of-culture approach, in the words of Richard Peterson (one of its founders and foremost practitioners), looks at the "complex apparatus which is interposed between cultural creators and consumers" (1978:295; see also Peterson and Anand 2004). This apparatus includes facilities for production and distribution; marketing techniques such as advertising, co-opting mass media, or targeting; and the creation of situations that bring potential cultural consumers in contact with cultural objects. Placing racks of paperbacks in a supermarket, signing a new singer with a record company, legwork done before and after an evangelical revival, organizing a blockbuster museum exhibit, and generating buzz for a new fashion designer—all of these activities are grist for the production-of-culture mill.

The Culture Industry System

We can begin thinking about cultural production by working from a framework developed for mass-produced cultural objects. Paul Hirsch (1972)

developed a useful model that he calls the "culture industry system"—in other words, the organizations that turn out mass culture products, such as records, popular books, and low-budget films. Hirsch pointed out that such cultural objects share a number of features: demand uncertainty, a relatively cheap technology, and an oversupply of would-be cultural creators. In the light of these factors, the culture industry system works to regulate and package innovation and thus to transform creativity into predictable, marketable packages. Figure 4.1 shows how Hirsch's system works.

Starting at the left, we see the creators (the artists, the geniuses, the talent) transformed into the technical subsystem that provides "input" for the rest of the system. This input must cross the boundary at Filter #1. Recall that there is an oversupply in the technical subsystem; it contains many more would-be singers, filmmakers, and novelists than the overall system requires. At the input boundary, the creative artists employ "boundary spanners," such as agents, to bring their work to the attention of the producing organization, or they may act as their own agents, for example by uploading their music video on YouTube. Producing organizations employ their own boundary spanners: talent scouts who check out new bands, editors who read through piles of manuscripts, and directors who look for promising screenplays.

The managerial subsystem consists of the organizations that actually produce the product: publishing houses, film studios, and record companies. Sometimes these are large firms, but sometimes they are not. For example, in the publishing business virtually everything can be subcontracted out, so a "publishing house" might consist of a single individual with a telephone. Sometimes it is not even that. In Nigeria, authors can arrange to have their books typeset and run off by the local newspaper printer; the name of a fictitious "publisher" then appears on the book even though no such organizational entity exists. In another twist to the managerial subsystem, although Hirsch thought of culture-producing organizations as turning out a large number of similar products, in some cases an organization exists only

Figure 4.1   The Culture Industry System
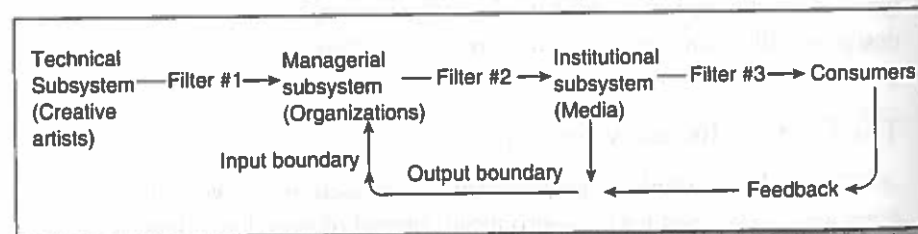
to produce a single cultural object. Called project-based organization, this is characteristic, for example, of independent filmmaking wherein contracts tie the director, producer, and actors together only for the duration of the project (Faulkner and Anderson 1987).

Strategies that the managerial subsystem employs to manage innovation include maintaining contact personnel at both boundaries, overproduction of products coupled with the recognition that most will fail, and unremitting attempts to influence or co-opt media gatekeepers. At the output boundary, the producing organization employs boundary spanners to reach the mass media—the crucial target of promotional activities—with news about the "product" (Filter #2). Media gatekeepers (the institutional subsystem) include such people as disc jockeys, talk show hosts, book and film reviewers, and that portion of the press that covers culture and its creators. For large firms, publicity and sales departments cultivate relations with the media, who serve as surrogate consumers. There is plenty of room for corruption here, as in the occasional payola scandals wherein record companies bribe disc jockeys to promote their latest records.

The ultimate consumers—the public—typically hear of new products through the media (Filter #3). If *Entertainment Weekly* gives a film an A, the magazine's readers will be more inclined to see the film. Although the producing organizations are highly dependent on such media exposure and work hard to get it, they also work hard to avoid needing it, either by producing a fairly homogeneous product or by convincing consumers as much. An example of the first strategy emerges in the various lines of romance novels. Readers know precisely what a Harlequin romance will be like; they know the basic plot formulas, the degree of sexual explicitness, and the length. That being the case, Harlequin does not need to advertise or promote each individual new novel. Instead, it promotes the lines—Harlequin Romance, Harlequin American Romance, Harlequin Silhouette Romantic Suspense—and emphasizes the homogeneity of the lines by giving each new title a number. The second strategy is to indicate more product homogeneity than actually exists. Promoting the "new Quentin Tarantino film" or the "latest album by Wilco" is a way of trying to bypass the media (who may say, after all, that this latest album by Wilco is not as good as the band's earlier ones) by convincing consumers that if they liked earlier work by a certain singer or director, they will surely like the new product.

Two types of feedback take place in the culture industry system. The first comes from the media and consists of airtime, reviews, and general media attention. The second comes from consumers and is measured by sales of tickets, CDs, or books; by jukebox plays; and by sales of related products (a hit movie like *Spider-Man 3* is surrounded by an enormous cloud of products,

from books to lunch boxes to stuffed animals to, finally, the movie video itself). Producing organizations interpret both types of feedback to assess the popularity of an artist, the effectiveness of their promotional activities, and implications for similar future productions.

Notice that we can superimpose Hirsch's model on the horizontal axis of the cultural diamond. Doing so emphasizes what should already be clear: The actual cultural object, the product of the managerial subsystem, is of minor importance in the total system. This is especially true for the mass culture products Hirsch had in mind, which are overproduced; the producing organization has no great stake in any one product so long as a certain percentage of its products are hits.

Hirsch developed his culture industry model specifically for tangible mass culture products, but with minimal modification, it could be applied to high culture, ideas, or any other cultural object. If, for example, we take a certain theological stance (let's say a feminist reading of the Bible) as our cultural object, we can think of a religious denomination in analogous terms to a culture industry system, turning out theological messages as its products or, in other words, as cultural objects. The technical subsystem consists of seminary graduates looking for positions. The managerial subsystem is the churches of the denomination (for simplicity, we can assume a congregational polity like the Baptists, in which individual churches "call" their own pastors). Newly ordained graduates ask boundary spanners such as mentors from the seminary to help them locate a position; meanwhile, churches send out their own boundary spanners in the form of pastoral search committees to canvass the "talent." A would-be pastor's feminism may be an asset or a liability for any given church. Once the pastor attains a ministry—has been taken on by a culture-producing organization in the managerial subsystem—his message, via sermons, rituals, and setting a pastoral example, would go out to the consumers, the members of the congregation. An institutional subsystem such as the local press may feature the new pastor and his innovations; in rare cases, churches employ a more elaborate use of radio or television to broadcast sermons and services. The most important medium, however, is word of mouth. Feedback from the congregation comes directly to the pastor and the lay leaders of the church. More dramatic feedback, analogous to ticket sales, comes from membership changes. If the pastor is popular, or if his innovative combination of biblical literalism and feminism goes over well, word spreads in the community and the congregation grows. On the other hand, if he is at odds with his congregation, or if the fit between his theology and their piety is a poor one, church members may vote with their feet, causing membership to

decline and prompting the church to go back to the technical subsystem in search of new talent.

The model of the culture industry system can be applied to cases from nonindustrial societies as well. In many West African societies, for example, young men want to join the secret societies that perform masquerades (in this system, the cultural object) on ritual occasions. Only a specific secret society is allowed to put on a specific masquerade. There is an oversupply of would-be masquerade dancers in the technical subsystem, and these young men may encourage kin and patrons to spread the word about their performing abilities. The secret society itself is equivalent to the managerial subsystem, and its members would scout for talent. (The roles of the boundary spanners are especially interesting in this case because no one actually knows or can admit knowing who the members of a secret society are; nor can the members reveal themselves.) The institutional subsystem operates via word of mouth; if a secret society is especially good at masquerading, people from neighboring villages may show up at the proper time to try to catch the performance. Negative feedback is also popular; village youth may mock a poor masquerade, and the secret society may have to rework its performance accordingly.

By these examples, we can see that analytic models such as Hirsch's help us understand how culture-producing organizations work. Such organizations attempt to produce a regular flow of products and reduce uncertainty. However, despite the controlling efforts of the managerial subsystem, a great deal of unpredictability comes from the market—those ticket buyers, congregants, audiences, consumers, and potential converts who ultimately determine the success of a cultural object. We need, therefore, to examine the nature of markets more closely.

Cultural Markets

Richard Peterson (1978) studied the production of cultural change in country music, and his research offers a good example of how market changes can reverberate throughout a culture industry system. Peterson described the production of country music. The culture industry system for this music (to use Hirsch's terms) was fairly small, generally rural and white, and had a high degree of integration among its subsystems. Record companies or their subunits were themselves devoted to country music. Singers traveled the performance circuit—including Nashville venues, state and county fairs, and country music festivals—and often sang live on country radio stations. Country stations, advertising such products as seed, fertilizer,

and chewing tobacco, appealed to a rural audience. In this system, the artists and country disc jockeys often knew each other, and the deejays who played country music exclusively knew the music and its performers very well. There was, finally, a close fit in the lifestyles of performers and their audience.

Change came in the form of a hip-swinging white kid named Elvis Presley, who created a sensation in the mid-1950s by mixing the traditional country sound with black rhythm and blues. Feeling threatened by the explosive demand for rock and roll, and fearing that their own brand of music might get swamped, country singers banded together to form the Country Music Association, dedicated to the preservation and promotion of their musical style. The CMA was extremely, and paradoxically, successful in its efforts. Peterson showed the dramatic increase in the number of country music stations that occurred during the 1960s and early 1970s. This increase brought with it some unexpected consequences. The new stations, now competing for a broader market, needed to extend their audience appeal beyond the traditional country music fans. So, they began taking some of the hard edges off the country sound, playing songs that sounded less twangy and more like rock. These stations (the institutional subsystem) called themselves "modern country radio," and they began to resemble the "top 40" stations. Disc jockeys (gatekeepers at Filter #2) who served the new stations no longer knew very much about country music; they preferred, and played, the songs that sounded most like rock.

Some recording artists gained immense popularity due to the expansion of the country music sound, but many of the old troupers found themselves cut out of the "modern country" market as rock and easy-listening styles prevailed. Old singing styles such as cowboy music were squeezed out entirely. The record industry responded to the changing market in its choice of talent (Filter #1). More singers felt compelled to adopt a crossover strategy, singing country-rock blends. Traditionalists formed a new organization, the Association of Country Entertainers, to fight the dilution of the country sound but with limited success. Record companies favored crossover sounds; modern country radio, eager to capture an ever wider audience and show advertisers they could reach affluent urban consumers (no more ads for chewing tobacco), emphasized familiar songs and recent hits. Country music became less and less distinguishable from other popular music.

In this case, a large new market worked to diminish the artistic distinctiveness of a cultural object, but the opposite can happen as well: Increased market size can result in cultural differentiation. Consider a case from a very different time and place, nineteenth-century Paris. Harrison and Cynthia White (1965) showed how the French dealer-critic system rose in the mid-nineteenth century to challenge the dominance of the Royal Academy and

serve the growing bourgeoisie. The conservative academy, with its annual juried salons, favored huge paintings of classical, patriotic, and religious subjects and rarely exhibited paintings of landscapes or humble subjects. But the growing market of middle-class householders did not want monumental depictions of "the death of Caesar" or "Jesus scourging the moneylenders" on their living room walls. They wanted what was pretty, familiar, and a pleasure to the eye. At about the same time, technical changes in the manufacture of pigments made it possible for artists to leave the studios and paint in the open air. The new market organized by independent dealers coincided with the new technology, as well as with the needs of an increasing number of painters to have a steady income, something that the academy salons could provide only to a tiny minority. The cultural objects that resulted from this new combination of dealers, critics, buyers, and painters were fresh, vivid renditions of natural scenes and middle-class life, with all of the brush strokes showing and nary a martyr or classical hero in view. In this manner, Impressionism, originally the work of a few salon rejects, was established as one of the most important and popular innovations in the post-Renaissance visual arts.

A similar innovation-through-exclusion process took place with American novels during the nineteenth century (Griswold 1981). At this time, American copyright laws protected Americans but not foreigners, which meant that publishers had to pay royalties to native authors but not to English ones. As always, there was an oversupply of manuscripts, and as always, publishers wanted to maximize profit, so American publishers favored English novels. This preference led to a curious result. American writers who wrote about the same subjects that English writers wrote about—love and marriage, money and achievement, the joys and sorrows of middle-class social life—were blocked at Filter #1 because the publisher could get that kind of novel from English authors without paying royalties. (The English authors made no profits on works published in the United States, either, and they complained bitterly about the American "piracy.") Accordingly, those American novels that did get published tended to deal with unusual, non-middle-class subjects, often telling about men or boys who fled society and had adventures in the wilderness. Many of the classics of our literature—*Moby Dick, Huckleberry Finn, The Deerslayer*—follow this model. Critics ever since have speculated on the peculiarities in the American character or psychology that produced so many "men outside society" novels and so few "love, money, and manners" novels. A production-of-culture analysis, however, suggests that such novels resulted from quirks in the American copyright law, not in the American character. When the United States finally adopted international copyright in 1891, most of the thematic differences between American and English novels simply disappeared.

No matter how stable a system may be, cultural markets respond to social change. As we saw in Chapter 3, it is probably pointless to debate what leads or lags behind what. There seem to be certain "unsettled" periods when both the social world, including its economic and political arrangements, and the expressive objects that we call culture change more rapidly than usual. Such fertile times produce new ideologies and genres, and under such circumstances, cultural markets and cultural forms change together.

An example of dramatic social and cultural change producing a new cultural market and new cultural forms to satisfy this market comes from early-twentieth-century China. During the late nineteenth century, China experienced severe political crises, including the Boxer Uprising discussed in Chapter 3, caused by the Qing dynasty's increasingly apparent incapacity to defend China against foreign incursions. Urban Chinese, especially those living in treaty ports with foreign enclaves and rapid industrialization such as Shanghai, had a growing appetite for news of all kinds, and the number of newspapers and presses grew dramatically (Lee and Nathan 1985). With more and more Chinese becoming literate and demanding both news and new ways of thinking, some writers took upon themselves the obligation to instruct their fellow citizens about the changing world. Others, inspired by the growing urban market, simply wanted to entertain readers and make some money. And for many, the impulses toward entertainment and instruction were intertwined.

Beginning about 1910, "butterfly fiction," which depicted true love and ill-fated lovers, was immensely popular, especially in Shanghai (Link 1981). These stories and novels were written by educated men whose employment prospects had been destroyed by the end of the civil service exam system in 1905. Drawn to Shanghai, they saw their chance with the booming readership, especially that huge urban middle class who wanted to read but didn't want anything too challenging. The butterfly love stories were non-Western and affirmed some traditional Chinese values, but at the same time, they glorified true love and marital choice. This happened at a time when, for many urban Chinese, family-arranged marriages began giving way to a freer choice of mates. Thus, butterfly fiction may be seen, after Durkheim, as a collective representation, reflecting and addressing new ways of thinking about love and marriage. But it was also a response to a distinctive urban context of literary production shaped by the migration of educated men (technical subsystem), a vigorous press (managerial subsystem), interacting circles of socially aware intellectuals (institutional subsystem), and an ever-increasing market of literate Chinese.

Modernization and urbanization—along with war, pestilence, and economic upheaval—are the most earthshaking occasions of cultural creativity, but social reconfigurations on a smaller scale can also be culturally productive.

Anthropologist Ulf Hannerz envisions culture as made up of "a network of perspectives, with a continuous production of overt cultural forms" (1993:68). This network model brings together the perspectives rooted in a particular subculture with particular experiences on the one hand and a cultural production apparatus with a very different social position and agenda on the other.

David Grazian showed how such a network has operated in the case of the Chicago blues (2003). In the postwar period, the perspective of African Americans on the Chicago South Side shaped their urban, re-imagined southern blues tradition. Blues music remained largely within the black enclave until the 1960s, when a gentrifying area on the North Side gave rise to a bohemian but affluent subculture in the Old Town area. Entertainment venues in and around Old Town and Lincoln Park offered blues musicians more money than ever imaginable before. By the 1970s, urban boosters were steering tourists to the Old Town/Lincoln Park area where they could enjoy "authentic" Chicago blues without running the risks of actually going to the South Side ghetto neighborhoods. Thus, the "Chicago Blues" grew from a subcultural perspective being disseminated to a (now global) market characterized by a radically different racial and economic profile.

The Production of Ideas

Much production-of-culture thinking draws on the culture industry model where the cultural products in question roll off the assembly line ready for mass consumption. We can envision the various subsystems involved in producing TV shows or romance novels. But our definition of cultural objects is much broader, embracing concepts and ideas. Does it make sense to think of these as "produced"? The basic image of cultural objects requiring creators and recipients and having some relationship to the social world that produces or receives them is the same whether we are talking about revolutionary ideologies or new video games. Specifically, creators produce an excess supply of all cultural objects, from art to theology, fashion to poetry, and ideas to Web sites. These cultural objects similarly compete for public attention, whether the attention comes in the form of belief (e.g., an ideology or theology), institutional development (e.g., publication, staging, filming), canonization (awards, institutional approval), hits (Web sites), or sales (mass culture).

Even patriotism can be seen as a cultural object produced through collective action. When cultural objects align with a particular national ideology, they are afforded special attention or privileges. France offers a centuries-long example: Johnson (2008) argues that the French Revolution spared the Paris Opera House because of its belief that its very lavishness appropriately

represented French culture. Mukerji (1997, 2009) argues that a century earlier gardens and canals were cultural objects that represented the French monarchy, while in the contemporary world DeSoucey (2010) shows how *foie gras* has come to express French patriotic sentiments, a case of what she aptly calls "gastronationalism."

But ideas have to compete for attention just like every other cultural object. William and Denise Bielby (1994) used the quote "All hits are flukes" to title their analysis of how television network programmers develop "interpretive packages" promoting concepts for development as primetime series. Writer-producers generate an oversupply of ideas for possible series that could get developed by the networks, put into their primetime schedules, and then picked up by local affiliates. As they pitch these programs to top network executives, advertisers, and affiliates, network programmers—the middle link in the system—frame these concepts in terms of the reputation of the people involved, the genre, and imitation (the new show is compared to a successful predecessor). Reputations are the most important form of currency here in terms of predicting which shows will get picked up. Interestingly, however, no relationship seems to exist between how the program is pitched and what its eventual ratings (market success) will be; all hits are indeed flukes. The early stages of this process involve no product, only an idea in the form of a brief synopsis that the networks show to advertisers and affiliates; "the pilots exist only as scripts, and the programmers themselves have yet to see the product they are describing" (Bielby and Bielby 1994). So, before the actual filming, the series concept must have made it through an institutional gauntlet.

Even such disembodied television concepts as "interpretive packages" are anchored by their institutional context, of course. What about ideas that have no such anchorage? Once an idea has been put into words or symbols (a manifesto, a peace symbol), it is a cultural object. So, which of these ideological cultural objects fall by the wayside, and which have social influence?

As alluded to earlier, several sociologists have suggested that some times and places are richer in their ideological production than others. Robert Wuthnow (1987) focuses on times of breakdown in the moral order: When the old ways of doing things, the old understanding of social relationships, no longer seem to work, people cast around for new ideas. Such times are fertile for ideological production.

Ideological oversupply takes place, especially in turbulent times, so the various ideas have to compete for resources, just as the potential primetime series have to compete for advertisers. Wuthnow describes the competition for resources as "selection," using an explicitly Darwinian metaphor to suggest why some ideological movements survive whereas most do not. Successful

selection gains stability through institutionalization in which the state or some other powerful institutional actor embeds the ideology into its practices. Not all resource-rich ideas win this ultimate prize of institutionalization. Amy Binder (2001) compared two ideological contenders—Afrocentrism and creationism—in terms of their institutionalization in school curricula; the former has been distinctly more successful than the latter.

But what part does the consumer play in this range of examples? In this discussion of the culture industry system, we have given short shrift to this vital element. So far we have concentrated on the connections among cultural creators, objects, and receivers—the lines (diamond-wise) among the three points captured by the "culture industry system" or the "market"—but we have not focused on the right point of the cultural diamond, the consumers, receivers, or audiences for cultural objects. It's time to do so. In the spirit of Hirsch's model, we might call cultural receivers the "interpretation-producing subsystem." In the next section we look at how receivers interpret cultural objects in order to produce their own meanings.

Reception

Despite all of the strategies employed by core firms in culture industry systems, a great deal of uncertainty remains. Record companies cannot predictably produce hit records anymore than publishers can reliably turn out bestsellers. Pastoral recruitment committees often find that their taste in ministers turns out to be at odds with the preferences of their congregations. Brilliant ideas fall on deaf ears. The ultimate success of a cultural object depends on its listeners, viewers, audiences, or consumers—in other words, on the cultural recipients who make their own meanings from it. For although the meaning of a cultural object may be initially suggested by the intentions or period eye of its creators, the receivers of culture have the last word.

We need to consider how and with what degree of freedom receivers make cultural objects meaningful. A basic postulate of the sociological approach to reception is that what Eviatar Zerubavel calls a "social mind" processes incoming signals (1997). Zerubavel argues that we should not conceive of the mind as either just a brain (the province of neuroscience) or just an individual mind shaped by individual experience (the province of psychoanalysis). In between these two endpoints of the most universal and the most particular comes the social mind, a group perspective formed by interpersonal communication and the province of a cognitive sociology that would "highlight our cognitive diversity as members of different thought communities" (11; see also DiMaggio 1997).

Our social minds—as members of particular groups and categories—shape what we pay attention to, what we get emotional about, and what meanings we draw from environmental signals. For example, European and American Jews may detect anti-Semitism in artworks like Wagnerian operas that might seem benign to others. Indeed, a history of oppression or victimization shapes a group's mind toward paying attention to subtle references to their oppression; groups not sharing this social mind often regard the victimized groups as being unduly "touchy." We can think of many ways in which different types of people—for example, men and women, gays and straights, Muslims and Christians, teenagers and parents—seem to view the same thing very differently, and these differences are to a considerable extent predictable products of the social mind.

The point is that to think of the reception of cultural objects, we need to understand that this reception, the meaning drawn from the cultural objects, is not firmly and undeniably embedded in the object itself or subject entirely to individual quirks. People's social attributes, their positions in a social structure, condition what they like, what they value, and even what they recognize in the first place.

Audiences and Taste Cultures

Survey research supports what common observation shows: Different types of people watch, buy, enjoy, use, read, and believe different cultural objects. Devotees of dogfights tend to be working class and male; devotees of opera tend to be upper class and white. Mainstream Protestants tend to be more affluent and educated than Pentecostals. People who drink vintage champagne tend to have higher household incomes than people who drink Night Train. A vast amount of research—both market studies and leisure time surveys—confirms the reality of cultural stratification.

The link between cultural taste and socioeconomic position is not always straightforward, however. Many cultural objects—detective novels and popular television programs, for example—cut across class, regional, ethnic, and gender boundaries. Moreover, social strata differ in the breadth of their cultural participation. To put it simply, upper-middle-class and middle-class people do more of everything than working-class people. Thus, whereas a working-class man may be knowledgeable about sports, popular music, and television, his middle-class counterpart is likely to be knowledgeable about fine arts, classical music, serious fiction, *and* sports, popular music, and television, to the extent that Peterson called these people "cultural omnivores" (1992; see also DiMaggio 1987). This broader cultural repertoire allows the middle-class person to operate in a variety of social settings,

switching his or her presentation of cultural knowledge to suit the occasion. In sharp contrast, one of the deprivations of ghetto dwellers is that although they may understand and adroitly negotiate the complex system of signification in which they live, their cultural skills are not transferable to the world outside the ghetto (Wilson 1987).

Putting forward a powerful theory of the consequences of taste, French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1984) argues that culture may be thought of as capital. Like economic capital, cultural capital can be accumulated and invested; moreover, it can be converted into economic capital. Take a simple example: Two workers, on the basis of job performance, are equally qualified for a promotion. Their boss, an enthusiast for Japanese culture, has scrolls and wedding kimonos on the walls of her office, reads modern Japanese fiction, and enjoys going out for sushi. Worker A is able to talk with her about a favorite Mishima novel or the merits of a new sushi bar. Worker B lacks the cultural capital—the background of knowledge and taste—to pick up on and respond to his boss's interest (or, even worse, he is heard to mutter something about being revolted by the thought of eating raw fish). All else being equal, which worker is more likely to develop a friendly relationship with the boss and get promoted?

Bourdieu mapped out the relationship between economic capital and cultural capital. Sometimes they correspond, as in the case of wealthy people able to purchase and patronize the fine arts, but at other times economic and cultural capital are at odds. Students, for example, are often high on cultural capital but low on economic; poorly educated but financially successful entrepreneurs or blue-collar workers may be high on economic capital and low on cultural. The latter usually try to raise the cultural capital of their children by seeing that they get a good education, preferably at prestigious schools. (The research based on and extending cultural capital theory is immense; see for example Lizardo [2006] on the role played by social networks, Chan and Goldthorpe [2007] on whether it is status more than class that is linked to cultural capital, and Baumann [2007] on the fluidity of cultural capital in Hollywood.)

Although economic capital may be bolstered, increased, or undercut by forms of noneconomic capital, the types of readily negotiable noneconomic capital may vary from place to place. After studying middle-class Frenchmen and Americans living in two major cities (Paris and New York) and two provincial towns (Clermont-Ferrand and Indianapolis), Michèle Lamont (1992) found that the kind of cultural capital Bourdieu stressed—knowledge of the arts, refinement of taste—was more important in Paris than in any of the other locations. In provincial towns, what might be termed *moral capital*—a reputation for honesty, decency, and reliability—is more important

in deciding who is admirable. In addition, Americans generally respect money, sheer economic capital, more than the French do.

Although exquisite taste and appreciation of artistic genres may be particularly Parisian, research indicates that possessing or not possessing cultural capital can explain a variety of social stratification outcomes. For example, let us say that getting a college degree and a well-educated spouse are both "prizes" valued by a given society. Let us further imagine that people having the same amount of wealth but different amounts of cultural capital (measured by such indicators as attendance at arts and musical events or reading serious literature) compete for these prizes. DiMaggio and Mohr (1985) showed that individuals with high amounts of cultural capital are more likely to win both the degree and the educated mate than their less culturally sophisticated counterparts.

Because people believe that cultural capital matters, groups naturally tend to inflate the value of what they already possess and try to prevent other groups from getting any. Historian Lawrence Levine (1988) documented how upper-class white Americans, feeling threatened by new immigrant groups, segregated their cultural institutions as "high culture," supported and honored by everyone but not too available to the masses, who might misbehave. Museums and other high-cultural bastions of this period often were not open on weekends and evenings, for example, ensuring that those who had to work for a living couldn't make much use of them. (Again, recall those lions guarding the doorways of art museums and libraries.) Similarly, Nicola Beisel (1990) showed how the same elites used anti-vice laws to make certain forms of popular entertainment, such as burlesque, illegitimate.

It seems clear that (1) the reception of various types of cultural objects is often stratified by social class and (2) that people may consciously or unconsciously use culture to support their social advantages or overcome their disadvantages. Note that the second point is not dependent on the first. As Peterson pointed out, people with higher educations have more cultural experiences from all levels—high, low, mass, elite, common, rare, you name it—to work with. They have a broader cultural repertoire, and this breadth may be more socially useful than having a refined knowledge of philosophy or the fine arts.

Bonnie Erickson (1996) showed that in the workplace, displaying knowledge of elite cultural forms is rare, probably because it is not an effective strategy for gaining compliance. What is effective is cultural variety, being able to navigate in different cultural seas. This cultural variety seems to come from having broad social networks, where one network might tune a person in to the latest *American Idol* winner, another to the latest Pulitzer Prize winner.

Next, we consider how an understanding of different types of recipients can illuminate the understanding of cultural objects as meaningful, shared symbols embodied in forms.

Horizons of Expectations

A German literary critic named Hans Robert Jauss provided a key for sociologists trying to understand cultural reception. Helping formulate the theory of literary reception aesthetics in the 1970s, Jauss (1982) pointed out that when a reader picks up a book, she does not come to it as an empty vessel waiting for its contents to fill her. Instead, she locates it against a "horizon of expectations" shaped by her previous literary, cultural, and social experience. A reader interprets the text—finds meaning in it—on the basis of how it fits or challenges her expectations. In constructing the text's meaning, she finds her horizon of expectations changing as well.

Jauss's reception aesthetics makes it possible to link the cultural and the social in the process of meaning construction. For example, in a study of how readers (book reviewers and literary critics) from three places interpreted the novels of a writer from Barbados named George Lamming, I found that different audiences interpreted the same books in very different ways (Griswold 1987). West Indian readers said Lamming's autobiographical novel *In the Castle of My Skin* was about the ambiguities of identity; the British readers said it was about how a youth, any youth, comes to maturity; American readers said it was about race. Given their differing horizons of expectations, and given the complexity and ambiguity of the novel, three related but distinct sets of meanings emerged among the three categories of recipients.

The concept of a horizon of expectations extends well beyond literature and offers a way to understand how any cultural object may be interpreted by people with specific types of social and cultural knowledge and experience. More than this, it suggests how any event may be transformed into a cultural object by being made meaningful. Of particular interest to sociologists is the additional virtue that this model offers rich comparative possibilities. Consider what would at first seem not a cultural object at all but a tragic event: the death of a child. In the United States, people generally regard such an event as a horrible accident, an intrusion of chaos into the predictability of our lives. The very meaninglessness of such a death can be made meaningful—rendered a cultural object—by setting it against our horizon of expectations about babies: Babies are individually valuable and cherished and rarely die. Thus, the death of an infant is a horrifying anomaly. In a Brazilian slum, on the other hand, a child's death has a different meaning altogether. Anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1992) showed

how parents in the squalid settlements outside a city in northeastern Brazil set infant mortality against a horizon shaped by extreme poverty, violence, and powerlessness. Given this horizon, these mothers (and sometimes fathers, though the men are often absent) respond to a child's death with little emotion. These Brazilian parents regard their babies as potential human beings, not actual ones. For people with such a horizon, an infant's death doesn't mean "One of our children has died" but "A creature that was never fated to live has departed. He was an angel, not a human, and has returned to heaven."

Looking at the different interpretations that people construct from the same cultural objects may reveal deeply held social assumptions. If we think of a television show as "shared meaning embodied in form," for example, we find that different groups of people share different horizons and therefore construct different shared meanings from the same cultural object. Tamar Liebes and Elihu Katz (1990) studied the way groups of viewers in Israel interpreted the primetime soap opera *Dallas*. Moroccan Jews who had immigrated to Israel saw *Dallas* as being about the bonds of kinship and how difficult family life could be. Russian emigrants interpreted the series as a none-too-subtle critique of capitalism. And native-born Israelis, just like a control group in Los Angeles, did not regard the program as reflecting any social reality at all; for them it was simply slick television entertainment.

Explicitly or not, many considerations of how producers of meanings attempt to engage a receiving group's horizon of expectations use the framing model. If cultural creators can frame their product or message so it resonates with a frame that the audience already possesses, they are more likely to persuade that audience to "buy" (an idea, a product, or a taste). Political propaganda operates this way quite overtly. Barry Schwartz (1996) has shown how FDR's administration, working to mobilize support for American involvement in World War II, keyed its pro-war message about the present to the Lincoln frame from the past. Counting on the collective memory that honored Abraham Lincoln's resolve in the face of war, the administration legitimated American military action by fitting it to the public's horizon of expectations that included the sacred place that Lincoln held.

In contrast, sometimes the creators of cultural objects have no idea how they will be received. Technical innovation offers some amusing cases of this. Wiebe Bijker (1995), a historian of technology, points out that the meaning of a newly invented artifact does not reside in the artifact itself; technologies acquire their meanings in social interactions. Thus the question of whether something "works" is something to be explained: It works for what and for whom? He takes the towering "ordinary" bicycle (with a huge front wheel and small back wheel) of the late nineteenth-century as an example. Did the

"ordinary" work? It certainly did not work for women, older men, or anyone concerned about safety or ease of use. On the other hand, it worked fine for the macho young men riding around the parks trying to impress the girls with their daring. When the technological innovation of safer bikes with wheels of equal diameters came along, the young men did not accept them because of their safety or comfort but only when they were shown to be faster.

By now the question arises: If every group has its own distinctive horizon of expectations, can such groups of people construct any meanings they please? Can cultural objects be interpreted in any way whatsoever, or do the form and content of cultural objects constrain the meanings found in them? Both the academic world and the general public have vigorously debated this question, which essentially concerns how much freedom cultural receivers have as meaning makers. Let us examine this ongoing controversy.

Freedom of Interpretation: Two Views

At the point where human beings experience cultural objects, they react, construct interpretations, and make meanings. We have seen that different groups can construct somewhat different meanings out of the same cultural objects. But how much freedom do people have to make these meanings?

Theoretically, there could be two opposing answers: (1) People can make any meanings whatsoever (receivers are strong/cultural objects are weak), and (2) people must submit to whatever meanings are inherently contained in the cultural object (cultural objects are strong/receivers are weak). At one extreme is unlimited freedom: People can do anything they want with the cultural objects they receive. French structuralist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966) once referred to the human mind as like a bricoleur or tinkerer, the sort of handyman who could fix or make things out of whatever bits and scraps of material happened to be around. Following this bricoleur logic, the recipient of a cultural object can make meanings virtually independent of the cultural object itself. We've all heard jokes to this effect: A sixteen-year-old boy asks another what a particular book is about, and he replies, "It's about sex." Asked what the movie he saw last night was about, he then replies, "Oh, it was about sex, too." And so on. Presumably, this young man would find a bowl of cereal, a passage from *The Merchant of Venice,* or a trip to the Laundromat to be "about sex."

This view, however—that recipients can make cultural objects mean anything, that virtually any bit of culture can be "about sex" or anything else—denies autonomy to cultural objects themselves. It implies that there are no distinctions, no better or worse, richer or poorer, inspirational or depressing,

or elevating or pornographic cultural representations, only different kinds of people experiencing the cultural object and assigning different meanings to it. Meaning becomes entirely a function of the receiver's mind. Such a position is anathema to a traditional humanities-based approach to culture (though it is held by some contemporary literary critics). Social scientists are uncomfortable with it as well, for it denies culture's role as a collective representation. If anything goes, or if any person's interpretation is as good as the next, culture's capacity to serve as a means whereby people "communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitude toward life" (Geertz 1973:89) is undermined.

The other extreme position holds that cultural meanings are tightly controlled and that receivers have virtually no freedom of interpretation. According to this view, people ignorant about the conventions of a particular cultural object may not understand it, outsiders to a subculture may not "get it," and scholars and specialists may labor to ferret out the hidden meaning of a text or symbol, but there is *a* meaning. Such a conviction, which for many people seems no more than common sense, has been called the "proper meaning superstition." Even though a cultural creator may aim for a particular interpretation or response to a work, our own experience suggests that people vary enormously in their responses to a cultural object.

When we push these positions to their logical extremes in this way, neither seems justified. Two schools of thought in the social sciences, however, essentially represent these extremes in a somewhat more presentable form. The first, mass culture theory, leans toward the strong culture/weak receivers side, suggesting that cultural objects can essentially overwhelm their helpless recipients. The second, popular culture theory, sees people not as helpless in the face of the cultural onslaught but as active makers and manipulators of meaning. These two schools offer very different conceptions of how human freedom and cultural power relate. Assumptions from each pop up in the public discourse over, for example, the influence of news media on presidential elections or the effects of lewd lyrics in popular songs. We need, therefore, to examine their assumptions and sort out their implications.

Seduction by Mass Culture

In my earlier discussion of the production of culture, the expression "culture industry" referred to the organizations that produced cultural objects for a market. It was a neutral term, implying neither good nor bad. In the view of mass culture theorists, however, there is little good about the culture industry.

Those who adopt the mass culture perspective see the culture industry as the technology for producing mass entertainment on a hitherto undreamed-of scale. Such entertainment aims at a low common denominator of taste, emphasizing the lurid over the moral or intellectual, to capture as wide a market as possible. Mass cultural products render their recipients numb and apathetic. This apathy, in turn, leaves these passive recipients ripe for political tyranny, while their sheer numbers force cultural producers to come up with ever more violent, sensational, and shocking materials to get a response from their jaded audience.

We have seen this view before as far back as Plato and more recently from the Frankfurt school. During the 1950s, when television was transforming cultural participation in the United States and Europe, criticism of mass culture came from both the political Left and the political Right. The Left saw the capacity for political criticism buried under the mindless drivel of mass entertainments; the Right saw the capacity for cultural critique, for refinement of taste, buried. Both Right and Left agreed that independent thought was imperiled, both worried about media-induced brainwashing, and both drew dark historical parallels with Roman emperors who diverted the plebeians with "bread and circuses" while the empire crumbled.

Of particular concern was the impact that mass culture might have on children, assumed to be impressionable and vulnerable to its messages. A typical specimen of this school was *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954), a book written by clinical psychologist Frederic Wertham, with excerpts appearing in *Ladies' Home Journal*. Discussing comic books, especially those depicting crime, he castigated comics for contributing to illiteracy, delinquency, and sexual perversion, as well as for glorifying violence as a means of solving problems. He was especially outraged by the interplay of the comics' messages about violence and sexuality with their advertisements:

Comic-book stories teach violence, the advertisements provide the weapons. The stories instill a wish to be a superman, the advertisements promise to supply the means for becoming one. Comic-book heroines have super-figures; the comic-book advertisements promise to develop them. . . . The stories feature scantily clad girls; the advertisements outfit peeping Toms. (217)

In such an indictment, we recognize the effects cited by the Frankfurt school (numbing and incitement to mindless violence), as well as the degradation, brutalization, and sexual explicitness deplored by conservative thinkers. Although the violence and sexual explicitness of contemporary mass culture make Wertham's worries about comic books seem downright quaint, the concern with mass culture's possible negative effects remains.

From the early 1970s until the present, for example, many sociologists have examined how mass cultural products perpetuated racial and gender stereotypes. A good example of this type of research focuses on children's books.

Mass culture's relation to violence is another evergreen topic, as in the legal actions involving rap singers, whose music seems to many people to promote violence toward the police and women. Popular music and especially television receive constant scrutiny for their impact on their audiences, particularly on children, although such scrutiny has had little inhibiting effect on the culture industry. Counterarguments cite freedom of expression, market demands, and the fact that mass culture only "reflects" the culture at large. In the view of mass culture critics, however, no horizon of expectations is robust enough to withstand the constant onslaught of violence and perversion. All audiences, they believe, are innocent, and all can be seduced.

The opposite view, however, holds that people are too knowing, too canny to follow cultural objects down the garden path. This view speaks not of mass but popular culture.

Resistance Through Popular Culture

In some ways, the term *popular culture* is a redundancy. Culture is public, and all culture must be popular to some extent; unpopular culture, like a TV pilot that fails to attract an audience, just goes away. But the term has come to mean the culture of the people, and here *people* means the common people, the non-elite majority—hence, the commonly heard contrast between high culture (or serious culture or good culture or Culture) and popular culture.

Popular culture clearly includes mass cultural products such as television shows, popular magazines, and off-the-rack fashions. It also includes, and emphasizes, the wisdom, common sense, values, and way of life of "the people," especially the nonpowerful and nonwealthy—those groups who, according to Bourdieu, lack both economic and cultural capital. In this respect, it draws on the old anthropological "way of life" definitions of culture. As indicated in the Snow and Anderson (1993) study of the homeless, all people need meaning in their lives; meaningfulness is not just a luxury indulged in by the well-to-do but a human necessity. Popular culture, so the theory goes, is the system of meanings available to ordinary people.

Among sociologists, the reevaluation of popular culture began in the 1960s, when previously dominated and ignored groups—minorities, gays, women, and the poor—demanded respect as never before. Now many social scientists, as well as scholars in the humanities, felt uncomfortable with the

old attitudes toward soap operas for women as trivial, black English as substandard, or the practices of the poor as irrational and dysfunctional. Scholars examining previously despised works, genres, and systems of meaning found them to contain complexities and beauties; at the same time, deconstructing previously esteemed works, genres, and systems of meaning, they found widespread representations of class hegemony, patriarchy, racism, and illegitimate canonization.

The reevaluation of popular culture occurred in two ways, and both of these approaches involve an image of the audience that is far from passive. First, scholars examined popular culture itself in search of hidden meanings that had been accessible to its recipients but missed by academics and other disdainful elites. For example, in separate studies Tania Modleski ([1982] 1984) and Janice Radway (1984) took a new look at an almost universally scorned form of popular literature, women's romance novels. Radway, who used focus groups to talk with readers about their interpretations of the romances, discovered they had distinct criteria for assessing the quality of what was usually dismissed as homogeneous formulaic novels. Moreover, the novels themselves were seen to contain a theme of the male who moves from arrogance to nurturing. This nurturing male was especially attractive to women readers, typically nurturers themselves who longed to be cared for in kind. Modleski found Harlequin romances to contain a revenge theme—the heroine almost dies or otherwise abandons the hero, causing him pain until she returns—and suggested that this subject represented women's collective fantasy of getting back at their oppressors. In both studies, and in this type of analysis as a whole, the popular audience is seen as decoding meanings that are especially satisfying in light of its social experience.

In the second form of reevaluating popular culture, the recipient is seen not only as decoding meanings to which elite recipients have been oblivious but also as actively constructing subversive meanings. Mass cultural objects may indeed be patriarchal or represent the "ideas of the ruling class," as the theory goes, but people do not have to accept these meanings imposed, as it were, from outside. They make their own meanings.

John Fiske (1989) used the analogy of mass culture being like a supermarket. People may pick up mass-produced items from the cultural supermarket, but when they cook (make meanings), they mix these supermarket goods with whatever they have in the pantry at home, thereby individualizing and transforming the final product—sometimes with surprising results. For example, Fiske studied audience reactions to *The Newlywed Game,* a television game show wherein couples scored points when each could accurately predict the other's responses to questions, which usually had risqué overtones. Although couples that exhibited high levels of agreement were

the winners in the program's formal terms, it was the losers—those who disagreed with each other—who won roars of approval from the audience. Fiske saw this reaction as a case of people creating counter-hegemonic cultural objects and subversive meanings. The rules of the game supported marital harmony under generally patriarchal authority, but the audience cheered for the rebels.

Both the popular culture theorists like Fiske and the mass culture theorists like Wertham are essentially concerned with reception, and both share the value of human freedom, but they interpret the relationship between cultural object and receiver very differently. Figure 4.2 presents a schematic of their differences on the cultural diamond. In the mass culture model, cultural objects impose their (simple, sensational) meanings on their audiences, but in the popular culture model, the audience makes new meanings.

As the global spread of mass communications technology increases, it remains to be seen which view of the cultural object/recipient relationship proves more accurate. Because cultural objects are interpreted not in isolation but by interacting human beings, it seems likely that distinct interpretations, or reinterpretations, will continue to emerge from groups having distinct experiences. The real danger, not envisioned by either mass culture or popular culture theory, may be that people will stop interpreting cultural objects at all.

Figure 4.2   Mass Culture and Popular Culture Theories on the Cultural Diamond
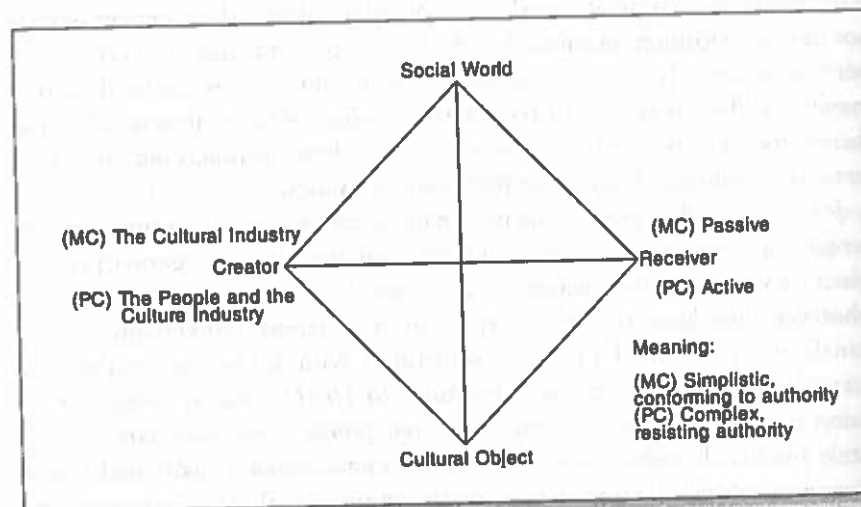
Like the native-born Israelis and Los Angelenos in the study of *Dallas,* people bombarded with cultural objects may simply reject the idea that these objects are socially meaningful. We take up the prospect of abandoned meaning in Chapter 8. For now, suffice it to say that such an intellectual disengagement of the receivers of culture from the cultural objects themselves may be a far more frightening idea than anything that the mass culture theorists envisioned.

SUMMARY

In this chapter, we explored the points and links of the culture diamond. Having already examined cultural objects and social meanings and the collective creation of those objects, we considered here the production-of-culture linkages among creators, objects, and recipients. We considered the role of recipients themselves, who bear socially shaped horizons of expectations and are engaged, actively or passively, with the culture they experience. Either through their numbed passivity or their grassroots power, these recipients, in turn, affect their social world.

Our analytic model is complete. But models themselves are no good unless they can tell us something about the world in which we live. In the next two chapters, we apply our analytic devices to social problems and business and organizational transactions. In these two chapters, we observe with a sociologically informed eye the operation of cultural meanings in the real world and the influence they exert.

NOTE

1. Native North Americans of the Canadian Arctic, who used to be called Eskimos, now prefer to call themselves and be called Inuit. I follow Grayburn (1967), who used the term *Eskimo* in his research; the soapstone sculptures are commonly referred to as *Eskimo art.*

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. Apply some of the theories from cultural sociology to explain the origin, production, and reception of new forms of music (e.g., hip-hop, the resurgence of folk music in the 1960s and 1970s, or your favorite) or new genres of television (reality shows, soap operas, or your favorite). Who are the creators, who are the receivers, and what is their relationship to the social world? What institutions mediate the connection?