

Why (popular) culture matters

Interview with David Hesmondhalgh

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David Hesmondhalgh is Professor of Media, Music and Culture and Director of the Media Industries Research Centre at the School of Media and Communication of the University of Leeds. He is also a member of the *Cultural Production and Media Policy* and *Visual and Digital Cultures* research groups and has recently started a *Music Reading Group*. Over the past 15 years, David Hesmondhalgh has conducted research on media and cultural policy, cultural industries, theories of media and, especially, popular music. His most recent publications include *The Cultural Industries* (2012, 3rd edition), where he discusses changes and continuities in television, film, music, publishing and other industries since the 1980s, and the rise of new media and cultural industries during that time, and *Why Music Matters* (September 2013), a book about the ways in which music might enhance people's lives, individually and collectively, and what often stops it from doing so. He is currently preparing a new book, to be published later this year, on *Culture, Economy and Politics*, co-authored with Kate Oakley, David Lee and Melissa Nisbett, examining the arts and creative industries' policies, heritage and regional cultural development, amongst other issues.

In this interview, conducted via email, David Hesmondhalgh analyses the complex articulation between the disciplinary field of Cultural Studies and the concept of popular culture, and discusses the relationship of music to social justice and affective experiences.

One of the main achievements of Cultural Studies as it emerged in the UK was the fact that it was able to establish popular culture as a serious area for academic research. How would you describe the current relationship between cultural studies and popular culture?

Over the last couple of decades, you have accompanied the many debates surrounding the ambivalent concept of popular culture. How much do you think has changed in the way academia deals with its complexities and ambiguities? Have we moved from a certain euphoria around the “popular” into something else?

I'd like to take these two questions together, if I may, by putting the relationship between cultural studies and popular culture into some historical context. The early cultural studies work on popular culture was very accomplished and of course very influential. It was undertaken by scholars who were talented, imaginative and energetic. Just as importantly, these scholars were committed to emancipatory political goals that have since suffered decades of defeat and/or incorporation. I'm thinking for example of the way in which the famous Birmingham Centre's work on working class culture and on youth subcultures was connected to a historical appreciation of both the marginalisation and the vitality of working class people. Or the way in which key studies on women and girls' experience of popular culture, right through to the 1990s, were fuelled by an invigorating sense of the necessity of feminism (McRobbie being the most famous case). What's more, these researchers tended to be interested in a kind of ethnography or anthropology or sociology of popular culture, how it was lived and breathed, even when their studies were exploring *textual* meaning, of music, clothes, hairstyles (as in Hebdige's famous book on subcultures). Early cultural studies was also extremely interested in history (such as the neglected book by John Clarke, Richard Johnson and others on working class culture).

Among the many strange directions taken by cultural studies, two seem to dominate when I now attend conferences or read collections and journals. The first is theoretical writing, which is often influenced by “continental” Europeans, usually French: Foucault, Deleuze, more recently Rancière, Badiou, etc. I have nothing against theory, in fact I like it, even though I'm probably more inclined to sociology than most of the theory folks. But the range of theoretical reference in cultural studies is usually now much narrower than in the supposedly Golden Years, and there is too often an implicit rejection (or sheer ignorance) of work that doesn't fit with the underlying assumptions of that strand of theory, of approaches that are hastily deemed to be

“humanist” or “liberal” or “sociological” (how terrible!). Entire swathes of social science, including highly relevant social and political theory, are simply cast aside (and no doubt some of that social science and social theory should pay greater attention to the best work in cultural studies).

The historical and sociological interest of early cultural studies seems largely to have disappeared from this more recent work (Rancière’s historical work should be an exception, but tends to be sidelined in favour of attention to his gnomic pronouncements on politics and aesthetics, and in any case I actually find his hostility to sociology really problematic). The connection to emancipatory political projects and political activism has also diminished, with some notable and honourable exceptions, such as Andrew Ross.

The second direction that cultural studies has taken is a study of popular culture that is often based on close textual reading or on interviews with, or observation of, small audience groups. This strand of research is usually rather un-ambitious in theoretical terms, and sometimes almost seems like a version of mainstream empirical sociology (audience focus groups, etc). Many cultural studies enthusiasts drawn to high theory would understandably deny that such work really constitutes cultural studies in any meaningful sense. So, strangely, the actual analysis of popular culture has come to take a kind of secondary or inferior position within cultural studies. In fact, the term ‘popular culture’ has almost disappeared from cultural studies in the Anglophone world – terms such as ‘ordinary’ and ‘everyday’ have replaced it.

It would be harsh to judge cultural studies and its relationship to popular culture today by the standards of the work that is remembered from the 1970s and 1980s. Those were special times, involving a remarkable set of circumstances and people. Many papers at cultural studies conferences are not very exciting, stimulating or rigorous, but the same is probably true of any area of study. It’s certainly true of many sociology, psychology, music, media studies and history conferences I attend. That’s probably for the simple reason that it’s really hard to do good academic work. In saying all this, I do recognise that the internationalisation of cultural studies has seen occasioned some superb studies, for example Eric Ma’s work on Hong Kong, where history, theory and empirical material are still being brought together.

There is a problem that is more specific to cultural studies though. In spite of its internationalisation, which of course I heartily welcome, cultural studies has failed to establish itself widely as a set of programmes and departments. There are a few professional groups but they are tiny and marginal compared with other scholarly associations. Graeme Turner argues in his wise and insightful book, *What’s Become of Cultural Studies?*, that this is because cultural studies itself was so relentlessly

suspicious of the notion of institutionalization, and of the very idea of academic *disciplines*, that it undermined its own future, in the name of a rather vaguely conceived interdisciplinarity. I think Turner is right.

None of this means that the study of what used to be called popular culture has entirely disappeared. In a whole range of humanities disciplines, I think it is now much more possible than before for people to conduct serious work on aspects of cultural life that once might have been dismissed as trivial. How much credit should be given to cultural studies as a discipline for this, I'm not sure. There was a more general 'cultural turn' in the social and historical sciences from the 1970s onwards, and a greater degree of interest in the 'ordinary' in a whole swathe of areas of enquiry, perhaps reflecting a late twentieth century rejection of certain modernist tenets. No doubt much of the better work drew upon some of the best achievements of cultural studies. But when I look at my bookshelves for titles of works on popular culture (even if that term is not used) that I think of as important, interesting and inspiring, very few of them were published in the last twenty years.

A welcome development in recent years is that scholars influenced by cultural studies – even if they might not be described as cultural studies scholars – have increasingly paid attention to the *production* of commercial culture, including questions of labour that were disgracefully marginalised for decades. Only the best of this work is infused with the theoretical scope and ambition of cultural studies in its glory days, such as John Thornton Caldwell's work on Los Angeles film and television. And none of it is really interested in the concept of popular culture. In fact, the relation to politics and ethics is rather distant in much of this work.

I don't mean to be too negative about cultural studies! I know some people are real believers in it, almost as a kind of intellectual mission. But what really matters for me are questions of emancipation, equality, freedom, and people's ability to flourish, collectively and individually. I'm sure cultural studies has something to contribute to those things. But perhaps it doesn't have nearly as much to contribute as it once had.

How would you comment on the longstanding debate that has insisted on the distinction between elitist and commercial forms of culture? Would you say it is still in any sense useful or appropriate?

In an era so clearly marked by the impositions of neo-liberalism and its economic/financial determinism, how do you envision the possibilities of appraisal of popular culture's aesthetic and political qualities?

Again, can I take these two questions together? There were always simplistic versions of the distinction you mention in question 3, and the terms themselves continue to be used in dubiously normative ways. A scornful use of the term “commercial” is often a mask for prejudice. The term “elitist” can reflect a philistine dismissal of wonderful artistic achievements. Of course Bourdieu’s great book *Distinction* set the terms for a debate about the way in which different cultural forms corresponded to class positions, and how cultural hierarchies constituted a particular form of class inequality that had previously been underexplored. But Bourdieu’s brilliant sociological analysis left little room for a more positive account of the role of aesthetic experience (and indeed knowledge) in people’s lives. The same can be said of other critical approaches, which saw culture as doomed, or utterly compromised, through association with ethnocentrism, or logocentrism, or late capitalism, and so on. I have sympathy with many aspects of the best versions of such critiques. But I think there is a continuing need for an account of the value of aesthetic experience and knowledge in people’s lives, including the contributions of works that might be old, difficult, and troubling, and that cultural markets might not provide effectively. This is one of the reasons that I find the work of Raymond Williams so inspiring. Williams was able to bring out the value of “canonical” literary works as well as how they were imbricated with problematic aspects of capitalism, modernity, conservatism and so on.

This question of the value of culture is a fundamental issue for education, and for cultural policy. I think accounts of that value are needed more than ever in the era of neoliberalism (here I’m trying to address your question 4!). They need grounding in a sense of human diversity, and the way in which culture might answer various fundamental needs that we have for play and narrative, humour, expression of emotion, and so on. I feel convinced, on the basis of the best work in political economy of media and culture (figures such as Edwin Baker and James Curran), and also the work of philosophers such as Russell Keat, that cultural markets are unlikely to answer those needs in modern capitalist societies in any meaningful way for the majority of people. In order to defend public provision of culture (through education, public subsidy of art and knowledge, etc) and the democratic regulation (not censorship) of media, we need a positive account of the value of culture, as well as a critical one. That needs to include a sense of the value of the great achievements of many different civilisations, as Martha Nussbaum shows in her book *Cultivating Humanity*. But it also needs to include reflection on the value of different types of popular culture, across many different cultures. This is an important aspect of my recent work, especially my book *Why Music Matters*.

In *The Cultural Industries* (particularly the revised version of 2012), you have sought to understand how much digital media have contributed to a significant transformation in the fields of media and cultural industries (and their particular policies). Where do you think these transformations are heading to at the moment?

It's obvious that computers have allowed lots of wonderful things for those of us lucky enough to afford them, and to have learnt how to use them properly. The extraordinary creativity of human beings is abundantly apparent on the internet, as is their capacity for hostility, mean-spiritedness, and greed. As you may have gathered from *The Cultural Industries*, I'm sceptical about claims that digitalisation has profoundly transformed human communication forever, and that these transformations have been empowering and liberating. Actually I think the moment of digital optimism, at its peak in Europe and North America at the height of the economic bubble of 2004-7, has now passed. People seem much more aware of the negative effects of digitalisation of communication on working lives (via relentless speed up for example). They seem much more knowing about the commercialisation of leisure time, and the commercial as well as governmental monitoring of what we do. Claims that cultural production has been democratised are less heard. A crucial thing to understand is that the cultural industries haven't disappeared, and they're not going to. They're just in competition now with another set of industries – the IT giants. At one time, I honestly think that digital optimists thought that these corporations (i.e., Google, Apple, Amazon, etc) were benign compared with Time-Warner, Universal, etc. That seems to me to have been extremely naïve.

In *Creative Labour: Media Work in Three Cultural Industries* (along with Sarah Baker), you look into creative industries and analyse the experience of their workers as they assess the quality of their own working conditions. In the end, you seem to advocate that the tension between the specific characteristics of creative labour and the larger structural forces that shape contemporary creative industries is inevitable and has its own way of contributing to creative production. How is that so?

Well, I do think that there is a longstanding tension, though I'm not sure whether it is inevitable. Creative workers, as well as pursuing the means to survive and prosper, also seek the time and means to create work that they are pleased and satisfied by. This is in tension with the needs of businesses to maximise profit by rationalisation and other

means. Yet that tension is made complex by the fact that the biggest profits often accrue to work that is actually rather innovative. So in order to nurture hits from talented producers, some businesses create conditions of relatively high autonomy. That doesn't mean that cultural capitalism is a wonderful thing though. In order to sustain a core workforce with relatively high levels of autonomy, a reserve army of aspiring cultural labourers must be maintained.

Your research in the field of creative industries policies has also drawn attention to the complex politics involved in public investment in cultural policies and how these unfold at national, regional and even individual level. How do you think it would be possible to reconcile, on the one hand, the fact that economic return on public investment is commonly taken as a decisive factor, and, on the other hand, the need to overcome cultural inequality and exclusion?

Ah, I wish I could formulate a programme that would enable such a reconciliation! These are fundamental contradictions in my view, because we live in a political-economic system that seems to nurture cultural inequality and exclusion. I'm not a revolutionary Marxist, I don't see the opportunity to overthrow that political-economic system any time soon. I'm an active member of the Green Party, and I see Green politics as a kind of radical social democracy based on views of the purpose of life that are at odds with economic orthodoxies. How does culture fit in? We need a different conception of the value of culture than those that have prevailed under neo-liberalism, where conceptions of that value have become increasingly reduced to economic gain. That needs contesting. But I'm not fanatically opposed to cultural markets per se. They have a place in a better society. So the big question is how can we move towards cultural democracy? That's very much something I want to explore in future work. I do think it's helpful though to work out the grounds of critique. A book I've just finished writing with three colleagues explores the relationship between cultural goals and economic goals in cultural policy, using Britain's New Labour governments (1997 to 2010) as a case study – it's called *Culture, Economy and Politics*. Our book shows that New Labour's policies paid only lip service to equality and access, and did so by the use of new public management techniques that were rightly experienced by professionals and other workers in the arts and cultural sectors as attacks on their autonomy – very much the same thing was happening in other areas such as health and education. We hope that there are lessons in the case of the UK New Labour government for other

governments. If this was social democratic cultural policy at all, it was a failed version of it.

Last year, you published a book which you chose to entitle *Why Music Matters*. Do we still need to justify why music matters? One might think that should be obvious by now, but in fact, it may be not... Could you explain why?

That's right – I don't think it's obvious at all. I think many of us have a sense that music matters strongly for us, as individuals and as members of communities and groups of like-minded people, but it can be hard to articulate the reasons. For me, the vital thing is some strange combination of the personal and the public: that music can feel very much like our own experience, but also something deeply shared.

I'm not the first person to make that point; Simon Frith does so beautifully in his book, *Performing Rites* from 1996. But I wanted to explore this issue at different levels or scales: how we think about music's role in our lives as individuals; in terms of our most intimate relations, i.e., in terms of love and sex, the subjects of so much music (and of course love and sex are not the same thing); in terms of its ability to enhance our experiences of co-present sociability, for example when we dance together; and finally in terms of its ability to create a sense of community across time and space. The most important link between all these elements is affect and emotion, and I draw on other writers to explore why music has a particularly strong relationship to feelings. But crucially I try to relate this to value, to the issue of why we might need cultural forms that resonate with our affective lives, individually and collectively. Central to this for me is the Aristotelian notion of flourishing – which is about more than just happiness and pleasure, it's about understanding the goal of life in fuller, richer terms (though god knows happiness and pleasure can and should be part of that). That notion of flourishing can be used in dubious and even conservative ways. But handled correctly, it connects up with questions of social justice, with how opportunities for flourishing – including musical flourishing – are distributed unevenly.

In that respect and others too, I'm struggling against the tendency in recent sociology of music, which in many ways is admirable in its attention to music in everyday life, to sideline questions of power and inequality, in terms of class, gender, ethnicity and so on (and it's striking that they don't use the term "popular culture" at all). And I should make clear that my book isn't intended as a celebration of music. It's about the way in which the relationship between music and affect can be related to antagonism and social division as well as to flourishing, and the hope for better times.

In *Why Music Matters*, you seem to question that long-standing belief that music has an intrinsic potential to transform the world, while, at the same time, you assert the claim that music holds a real importance to individuals, communities and nations. How is this importance any different from its alleged transformative potential?

I completely recognise the inspiring potential of music, including popular music, to summon up and encapsulate emancipatory political emotion, including anger. The Clash changed my life! In my book, I discuss the feminist politics encoded into some great pop music, and other examples of the relationship between music and politics. All this is definitely part of why music matters. It's just that sometimes, for example in rock journalism and "rockumentary", the value of music has been implicitly *reduced* to its so-called transformative potential. I think the relationship of music to human flourishing and social justice is more complex and interesting than a lot of rock history suggests. Not everything has to be about a heroic shift, with 1967 (or 1976) as some kind of equivalent of the storming of the Bastille. What sometimes seem to be heroic achievements – admittedly by great musicians - were in fact rather incremental, and were built on wider social and cultural changes. So I guess what I'm really doing here is saying that we need to ground our understanding of the value of music in the ordinary and the everyday – in the popular! But this needs to be a reinvigorated notion of the popular, based on how people actually live their lives, and experience music, rather than myths about history. That might involve a less grandiose, macho and doctrinaire politics than some formulations of popular culture that prevailed in the 1970s and 1980s – though I wouldn't deny that there will probably have to be struggle and suffering if we are going to contest the current state of things. I believe in non-violent contestation, but I have no doubt that capitalists and their allies will get even nastier if alternative ways of thinking begin to pose a serious threat to the capitalist order. Music and culture are only a part of that, but they matter.