

A Comment on Mr. Grimsted's Paper

IT IS NOT an easy task for me to comment on a paper so deeply rooted in a culture that is not my own—and all of Mr. Grimsted's allusions are not as clear to me, as for example, the first reference to *Zelig*. I want to say also that the expression 'popular culture' surely has not the same immediate meaning for American and French historians. In the United States it refers to the contemporary mass culture, generally considered as a poor, manipulated and alienating culture. In France—and perhaps in Europe—the term 'popular culture' evokes at first a lost culture, lively in the ancien régime societies, a culture different from and resistant to the legitimate culture that the Church and the State tried to impose. To distinguish clearly between these two contradictory meanings of the same expression seems important in order to avoid ambiguities and misunderstandings as much as possible. This said, I want only to stress some general questions raised by the paper and to propose some reflections on the ways in which the history of books and publishing can be used as an entry into the study of popular culture. I want to agree with Mr. Grimsted's criticism of the dominant and classical understanding of popular culture, either in America or in France. This understanding is based on three assumptions: first, that popular culture can be defined by contrast to what it is not; secondly, that it is possible to characterize as popular—in a strictly social sense—the public of particular cultural productions; and thirdly, that cultural artifacts can be considered as socially pure, popular in and of themselves.

These three characteristics, recognized as basic in the American theories of popular culture, were also central in the classical

This article, in slightly different form, was read at the conference on the history of the book in American culture as commentary on the paper delivered by Mr. Grimsted.

works done in France on popular literature, that is to say, the chapbooks printed in such provincial cities as Troyes, sold by peddlers, and generally known as the *Bibliothèque bleue*. According to the traditional hypothesis, it was suggested that these books were intended for the people of the countryside, and that their texts were anonymous works, based on oral traditions and folk culture. But it is now clear that these two assumptions are dubious. All the texts of the French chapbooks had already been printed before their popular editions, and all have a learned origin and circulation previous to or parallel with their diffusion by the *Bibliothèque bleue*. And it is now possible to say that the chapbooks did not have a specific public but constituted a reading matter for different social groups, each approaching it in ways ranging from a basic deciphering of signs to fluent reading. This French example fits very well with the remarks made by Mr. Grimsted on the audience of the opera in the United States in the 1840s, or on the readers of James Fenimore Cooper and Walter Scott.

I believe, therefore, that we must replace the study of cultural objects or productions considered as socially pure with another point of view that recognizes each cultural form as a mixture, whose constituent elements meld together indissolubly, whose public in the modern and early modern societies is always cross-class and mixed.

Perhaps it is pointless to try to identify popular culture by some supposedly specific distribution of cultural objects, for example, by some genres of printed materials. Their distribution is always more complex than it might seem at first glance, as are their appropriations by groups or individuals. A sociology of distribution, implying that the classification of social groups corresponds strictly with a classification of cultural products or practices, can no longer be accepted uncritically. It is clear that the appropriation of texts or codes or values in a given society may be a more distinctive factor than the always illusory correspondence between a series of products and a

specific sociocultural level. The popular cannot be found ready-made in a set of texts that merely needs to be identified, listed, analyzed. Above all, the popular indicates a kind of relation, a way of using cultural products, or ideas and attitudes that are shared by all of a society but used in styles that vary. Such an argument evidently changes the work of the historian because it implies identifying and distinguishing the different ways in which cultural sets are differently appropriated.

For a history of the book, such a point of view as that suggested by Mr. Grimsted has several consequences. In the first place, it requires one to recognize and to differentiate the contrasted ways of reading that exist in a given society. Perhaps we could characterize popular reading as a mode that needs texts broken into numerous segments, articulated on a small set of narrative schemas, with many repetitions, summaries, and titles. That is to say, popular reading can be described as a unique form of reading that differs from learned reading, in which the reader is able not only to grasp the texts in their overall meaning, but also to classify immediately each text in a canonical repertory of genres, and to understand texts that have very different structures.

Secondly, to define culture as a plurality of appropriations forces one to focus upon the implied readers and/or reading that each publisher inscribes in his editions. If we accept the idea that the same text can circulate in different social groups, it is necessary to describe closely the physical, material, sometimes textual differences that exist between the printed objects that make that text available to different publics. Surely, Fenimore Cooper belongs to elite and popular and middle class culture, *but* his text reached these different milieus through various printed forms. The case is clear for the *Bibliothèque bleue*: the texts of the series were learned works, mainly religious or literary, but the popular publishers adapted their presentation for readers who were not learned. They reduced the original texts, and simplified them in order to permit a process

of reading that avoids any memorization of numerous characters or episodes. They divided the chapbook, creating new chapters, multiplying paragraphs, adding titles and summaries, in order to facilitate a process of reading that required short and closed sequences. Therefore, to study popular literature is, in this case, to study how the publishers tried to make a learned or shared text compatible with specific cultural abilities.

From this perspective, a topic very important for me—and now to other French colleagues—is the problem of the relationship between visual images and written words in the prints published for a public that is not, or not only, the public of the *virtuosi* of reading. The different possible relationships between text and image, from inclusion in the same space to complete separation, create various possibilities for decoding the visual message or understanding the text itself. It seems to me that when images and texts appear side by side, the printed material in which they are located was more likely to be understood in the same or similar ways both by the fluent reader and by persons only capable of a rudimentary reading. All these kinds of printed materials (almanacs, broadsheets, posters, comic strips) *surely* played a great role in familiarizing the people of the early modern and modern period with printed and written culture. By contrast, when the image and the text are separated, the image, considered as an illustration, probably gave rise to different readings, some that understood all the dimensions of the relation between the two languages, and others that only made sense of the image and the text separately. But, however that may be, I think that the study of the placement, role, and form of images in those publications dedicated to a large public is one of the major issues in the reappraisal of popular printed culture.

On another point, I fully agree with the two-fold criticism made by Mr. Grimsted of the opposed theories of mass culture, considered either as powerful manipulation or direct expression of popular myths and desires. These two views seem to oblit-

erate the reality of cultural consumption. Cultural consumption, such as reading, is always a form of production that creates ways of using that cannot be limited to the intentions of the producers or manipulators. Cultural consumption is not passive, or dependent, or submissive, but a creative activity, an 'art of doing' and 'doing with' imposed materials. In no way can the user's or reader's intelligence be reduced to a soft wax on which the ideas, representations, and models of the mass culture, or of the culture for the mass, could be inscribed with absolute legibility. For too long, the acculturating force of messages manipulated by dominant groups has been overestimated, whether in the case of mass culture in the twentieth century or the culture imposed by the absolutist state and the religious reformations—Catholic or Protestant—in early modern Europe. For too long, the history of culture has been written as a succession of golden ages of popular culture and of dark ages in which it is repressed, disintegrated, destroyed. This schema has been used to understand the cultural changes before and after the thirteenth century, before and after the mid-seventeenth century, before and after the modernization of fin-de-siècle Europe, before and after the development of a canned and Americanized mass culture in the 1950s.

Contrary to this habit, which always locates popular culture in a world we have lost, in a golden time, a history of the printed materials intended for a large public must consider all the traces of the different uses of these materials, all the cultural and social practices through which the printed matter is appropriated. For example, in early modern Europe, between the practice of private, individual and silent reading on the one hand, and passive listening to a printed text read aloud by an oral mediator on the other hand, there exists a wide range of attitudes toward printed culture, collective and utilitarian attitudes, rooted in the basic social experiences of the popular classes, developed in the workshops, the festive confrater-

nities, or the religious conventicles. I suppose that the same kind of relationships to books existed too in America between the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries. In his paper Mr. Grimsted suggests that the term *neglected* might be better than *popular* to qualify this 'other' culture which is not the canonized one. It is possible to agree, provided that the opposition is seen as a process that is constantly at work, determining the boundary between the neglected and the canonized. Let me take the example of early modern France. The diffusion of the chapbooks on a large scale had two consequences. First, it led to a contrast between two sets of texts: those that aimed to feed the curiosity of the popular classes, i.e., texts abandoned by learned readers, and the texts that constituted a renewed high culture. But, as I said before, the texts shared by all the society are very numerous. In this case, the chapbooks created another difference: between two kinds of printed materials, with forms, circulations, and uses that are no longer one. The material aspects of books indicate clearly this contrast: on the one hand, a book can be seen as a noble object, refined, bound, and preserved; on the other hand, a book can be defined as an ephemeral, rough, and cheap object. Hence, the texts published in this manner were progressively stigmatized and became in the eyes of the elite unworthy reading because they were immediately recognized as belonging to another culture. Hence, the neglected culture is not fixed once and for all, but results from complex processes that qualify as distinctive, or disqualify as vulgar, certain texts and objects.

I think that when the differences in book diffusion were attenuated, when the printed work was no longer a rare possession, the distinction between popular and elite concerned above all the *manner* of reading—whether recommended or spontaneous, praised or condemned. This is why the study of popular printed culture implies for me a study of the successive and contradictory representations of the different uses of books.

The propositions listed by Mr. Grimsted at the end of his paper are very impressive and suggestive. They lead one to choose different series of printed materials and to study them as texts, as objects, as commodities.

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