Petro Esterhuyse

An anthropological perspective on popular culture

First submission: April 2003

In contrast with the view of culture as an autonomous, integrated unit, culture is presented in this paper as a fluid, complex and frequently fragmented process located in social interaction between individuals, acts, thoughts and objects which convey meaning. This concept of culture accommodates a description of popular culture as those cultural practices in which social actors interpret, negotiate, articulate and transform meaning. However, in addition to being a set of subjects belonging to a certain field of study, popular culture is also an arena which practitioners of the interdisciplinary movement of cultural studies view as extremely suitable for the hegemonic struggle between social actors over meaning. The viewpoint is taken that anthropologists have naturally and successfully entered this relatively unexplored field and, specifically with regard to media studies, contributed fine-grained ethnographies which have also taken cognisance of the broader historical and cultural universe.

'n Antropologiese perspektief op populêre kultuur

In teenstelling met die siening van kultuur as 'n outonome, geïntegreerde geheel, word kultuur in hierdie bydrae voorgehou as 'n vloeibare, komplekse en dikwels gefragmenteerde proses wat gesetel is in betekenisdraende handelinge, denke, objekte en sosiale interaksies tussen individue. Hierdie begrip van kultuur akkommodeer die beskrywing van populêre kultuur as daardie kulturele praktyke waarbinne sosiale akteurs betekenis interpreteer, onderhandel, artikuleer en transformeer. Populêre kultuur is egter ook, benewens 'n stel onderwerpe behorende tot 'n bepaalde spesialisasieveld, 'n arena wat deur praktiseerders van die interdissiplinêre kultuurstudiebeweging beskou word as besonder geskik vir die hegemoniese stryd om betekenis tussen sosiale akteurs. Antropoloë het gemaklik en met vrug hierdie relatief onverkende terrein betree, en spesifiek met betrekking tot mediastudies, 'n bydrae gelewer met fyn genuanseerde etnografieë waarin ook die groter historiese en kulturele geheel verreken word.

Dr P Esterhuyse, Dept of Anthropology, University of the Free State, P O Box 339, Bloemfontein 9300; E-mail: esterhp.hum@mail.uovs.ac.za

In 2002 the Faculty of the Humanities at the University of the Free State established an academic programme in cultural studies. Anthropology, history and philosophy were the main subjects included in the multi-disciplinary programme. In an effort to establish common ground between these three main disciplines as well as the various minor disciplines (sociology, art history and political science), a workshop was held to determine the disciplinary input unique to each as well as overlapping themes and approaches. As an anthropologist I was acutely aware of the fact that colleagues from other disciplines often have only a vague (or even outdated) idea of the anthropological definition of culture. I was also interested in exploring the possible link between anthropology and the approach of the interdisciplinary cultural studies movement pioneered in Birmingham, England. This article represents the result of my inquiries into and reflections on the contribution of anthropology to the conceptualisation of popular culture.

The first section of the article presents a brief overview of key developments concerning the conceptualisation of popular culture as found in the literature of the cultural studies movement. In the second part certain ideas concerning the present anthropological understanding of culture are explained. These by no means represent the full spectrum of anthropological thought but they should give an indication of the complexity and scope of the phenomenon and of the in-depth experience and knowledge which anthropologists have accumulated. The third part examines the contribution of anthropologists to the field of popular culture.

1. Cultural studies and popular culture

The scholarly field of cultural studies took shape in the 1950s and quickly acquired popularity all over the world. The movement gained momentum with the establishment of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in 1964 under the guidance of Raymond Williams and Richard Hoggart. Writings of members of the Frankfurt school of critical theory (eg Horkheimer and Adorno), as well as various contributions from literary humanism, media studies, feminism, poststructuralism, symbolic interactionism and decon-

structionism, were employed to study cultural processes, commodities, subcultures, the politics of everyday and personal life, as well as cultural performances and artefacts in the post-industrial Western world, in particular (cf Agger 1992; Denzin 1992; Thornton 2000). The political and social movements of the past three decades have all influenced the themes, debates and research priorities of cultural studies (Frow & Morris 2000), which today represents an interdisciplinary field of study with greatly differing emphases according to the various global contexts in which it is practised (cf Frow & Morris 2000).

Practitioners of cultural studies claim to study culture in its broad "anthropological" sense, formulated by Raymond Williams as "a particular way of life, which expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning but also in institutions and ordinary behaviour" (Williams 1994: 56; cf Frow & Morris 2000: 316). Denzin (1992: 74) elaborates on this definition by stating that meanings, in their turn, are influenced and

> molded by the larger culture- and meaning-making institutions of society-at-large, including the mass media, film, social science, art, religion, and politics.

The basic assumptions of cultural studies are grounded in Marxism. While certain strains in cultural studies are less overtly critical (cf the later discussion on popular culture below) the majority of practitioners assume *inter alia* that culture is one of the prominent sites where inequality (in terms of ethnicity, gender, race and class) is established and contested. Furthermore, it is the arena in which subordinate groups challenge meanings imposed by dominant groups, making culture an important site of political and ideological struggle (Agger 1992: 9; Denzin 1992: 74; Storey 1994: ix). With this very specific interpretation of culture, the phenomenon can never be viewed as "neutral" — it is a process that divides as much as it brings together. As Storey (1994: ix) explains it, the purpose of cultural studies is to analyse how culture helps to establish the social structure and shape a particular history. By contrast, most anthropological research output has tended to study culture only as a reflection of a particular social structure and history (cf the following section on the anthropological definition of culture).

In the definition of culture as articulated by cultural studies, the domain of popular culture receives major emphasis. Storey (1994: viii) maintains that popular culture is central to cultural studies. As part of the project of cultural studies the study of popular culture has undergone various changes over the years. Originally, the term "popular culture", as formulated by Herder, referred to expressive forms of culture among the common people. In categorising these forms, he distinguished between "high" and "low" culture, with ordinary citizens having "low" culture and the ruling class or elite "high" or learned culture. The "low" or "folk" culture category continued relatively unchanged through the nineteenth century and only became "mass" culture when rural people moved to cities and became consumers of, in general, commodities of culture (Traube 1996: 130). Popular or "mass" culture in this context refers to the industrial means of production of cultural products. However, the "folk" category of popular culture acquired a further interpretation in the second half of the twentieth century.

Frith (1996: 415) makes a useful distinction in this regard between "culture of the people" and "culture for the people". The latter refers to the industrially produced commodities (such as cinema, radio and popular music). The former, although found among industrialised people, is a continuation of the "folk" culture, which expressed or gave shape to popular and spiritual beliefs as well as to aesthetic, hedonistic and symbolic values and traditions — the lifestyle of a group. What made it "popular" was how it was interpreted by a specific group of people, giving them a sense of identity. Frith (1996: 415) formulates this as follows:

> 'Popular culture' implies a culture rooted in particular (and usually class-based) social processes, relations, and values; 'the people' are not the anonymous 'masses'.

Overlapping with this new variety of "folk" culture was culture produced for the people, where the concept "popular" indicated both the qualitative and the quantitative use of certain industrially-produced commodities: people having certain attitudes to consumption, and large quantities of a product being sold, respectively.

In Frith's (1996) description, no implicit negative evaluation of "low" or "mass" culture is mentioned. From an elitist perspective, the

judgmental attitude was nonetheless always present, devaluing popular culture. In the period between World War II and 1970, some exponents of cultural studies emphasised a different side to this negative evaluation in focusing on the effects of commercial culture (popular culture) upon consumers. The left-wing argued that the mass media of communication, the entertainment industry and the commercialised leisure industry (especially in the USA) transformed culture into an instrument of social control (Traube 1996: 131), with consumers being perceived as passive receivers of standardised, profit-orientated products. This idea of popular culture was based on the class divisions in society and objected mainly on behalf of working-class people. However, empirical audience research in mass communication studies has shown that the "working class" does not passively absorb media texts, but actively selects and uses the media to fulfil its own subjective needs (Traube 1996: 132). As Frith (1996: 416) points out: the "working class" is not necessarily the target of popular books, films, recordings and television programmes. The argument could also be that vast numbers of people actually enjoy the cultural products of modern industries. If culture were only manipulative and a means of imposing social control, then those who enjoy it would have to be totally passive and "drugged". Since in fact ordinary people are capable of recognising the influence of the cultural industries, a rethinking of popular culture was clearly called for (cf Hall 1994).

Therefore, partly as a result of this awareness of the opportunistic response of consumers and the mentioned pessimistic view of cultural production, the study of popular culture "reached an impasse" (Traube 1996: 132). As part of a broader movement within the domain of cultural studies, the concept of popular culture was reviewed in the early 1980s and reformulated according to the modified Marxist framework of Gramsci. The concept of hegemony is central to this framework. Gramsci argued that hegemony is a concept which includes but also goes beyond two other concepts, namely culture as a "whole social process", and ideology as it is used in any of the Marxist interpretations in which meaning and values are the expressions of a particular class (Gramsci 1990). In the case of culture, Gramsci insists that it is only in the abstract that people are able to define and shape their lives, because of the struggle for dominance and subordination between

ruling and subordinate classes in capitalist societies. Hegemony goes beyond ideology in the sense that it is more than a system of ideas and beliefs — it is a "culture" organised by the dominance and subordination of particular classes (cf Gramsci 1990; Ortner 1984). A comment by Bennett (1994: 225) partly explains why Gramsci's views were so influential:

> Where Gramsci departed from the earlier Marxist tradition was in arguing that the cultural and ideological relations between ruling and subordinate classes in capitalist societies consist less in the domination of the latter by the former than in the struggle for hegemony — that is, for moral, cultural, intellectual and, thereby, political leadership over the whole of society — between the ruling class and, as the principal subordinate class, the working class.

With this continuing struggle for hegemony in mind, Hall (1994: 133) defines popular culture as follows:

> Popular culture is one of the sites where this struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged […] It is the arena of consent and resistance. It is partly where hegemony arises, and where it is secured […] it is one of the places where socialism might be constituted. That is why 'popular culture' matters.

The contribution made by this view is that it unites the opposing poles of producers and consumers. According to Traube (1996: 133) Hall is successful in this conception of popular culture because culture is not reduced to

> a form of cultural control imposed from above [... nor ...] understood as a purely expressive culture emergent from below.

Not everyone involved in cultural studies would quite agree with Hall's view, but all would certainly confirm the political content of the definition (cf Fiske 1989; Storey 1994). Partly because of the over-politicisation of popular culture, another stream of thought among the practitioners of cultural studies has become prominent since the 1980s. This interpretation of popular culture, identified by McGuigan (1994: 547) as a "drift into an uncritical populism", builds on the existing ideas (such as those of Frith) about the consumption/reception of cultural commodities and the media. According to one of its main proponents, Fiske (1994), it goes out from the word as popular meaning "of the people", and popularity springing from, and serving the inte-

rests of the people. It denies that consumers are cultural victims of dominating producers, since they become empowered while producing resistive meanings that are in themselves a form of social power.

In criticising the populist interpretation of culture, Frow (1995) and McGuigan (1994) argue that it represents a simplified and romanticised focus on "the people" as a more or less homogeneous group while it ignores the complexities and rivalries among subgroups within "the people". This critique may be applicable to some of the writings offereing a populist interpretation, but in general the proponents make a valued contribution in the form of detailed descriptions of people's ways of life. Thus, like anthropological studies of "exotic" cultures, these cultural studies either describe the everyday life — the ways of talking, eating, dressing, playing and working — of a group of people, or they write about the struggle and resistance people put up in an attempt to overcome the dominant social, economic or political forces (cf Frith 1996).

A major strand of interest in popular culture originated in response to the nature and impact of communication technologies, with the result that most work on popular culture in the second half of the twentieth century discusses the media and its impact (cf Frow & Morris 2000). This emphasis has in a way applied hegemony theory by eroding the sharp division between top-down producers and resistant consumers to focus on the product or messages created by the encounter between them. Practitioners working in this field approach popular culture as a text which could refer both to activities and to objects. It could, for example, analyse a television show to determine how its formal qualities, aesthetic strategies and general organisation of content aim to provide pleasure (cf Frith 1996). Formulated in this way, such studies treat the television show, video, drama or film as a self-contained artefact. However, in most cultural studies the textual analysis would include how political and economic ideologies influence, manipulate or construct media products, while also focusing on consumers and how they might employ the media for resistance and political expression.

2. Features of contemporary culture as distinguished by anthropologists

Before considering the contribution of anthropology to popular culture, it is necessary to discuss some anthropological perspectives on contemporary culture, because most studies on popular cultural subjects are inspired by this disciplinary resource of cultural theory. Another purpose of this discussion is to give a glimpse into the complexity of the phenomenon we call culture.

Anthropologists have disagreed for decades on the content of one of the discipline's most central concepts, namely "culture". Over time, culture has been seen to reside *inter alia* in the structure of social relations (Radcliffe-Brown 1952); in values, ideas and knowledge encoded in systems of symbols (Goodenough 1964); in processes of the human mind (Levi-Strauss 1963); in technology, economy and material artefacts (Harris 1969); in meaningful intersubjective public interactions (Geertz 1973), and in cognitive schemas or models (D'Andrade 1984, 1992). One of the explanations for this variety is the fact that anthropology has had very different histories in Britain, North America and Europe. Culture was always a prominent concept in the anthropology of the USA and, to a lesser extent, also had a firm foothold in European anthropology. British social anthropologists in the tradition of Radcliffe-Brown were cautious of giving it too strong a theoretical position while students of Malinowski gave it prominence as a goal-orientated instrumental system. In this pursuit their contributions were mainly in the in-depth ethnography of specific cultural topics, such as kinship, religion, magic, ritual, descent and culture change (cf Honigmann 1976; Kuper 1973).

By the 1980s, the notion that anthropology faced some paradigmatic turning point had been generally accepted (cf Benthall 1995; Borofsky 1994; Grimshaw & Hart 1994). Under the influence of two leading American publications, *Writing culture* edited by Clifford & Marcus (1986), and *Anthropology as cultural critique* by Marcus & Fischer (1986), anthropologists became increasingly critical of their theoretical assumptions and research methodology. One of the key debates in this process of self-examination was the concept of culture. For example, with renewed attention anthropologists realised that "culture"

is an anthropological construct, a concept and not a living entity. Some of the enduring ambiguities of the concept, such as the overlap between continuity and change or the difficulty of demarcating cultural boundaries, came under intense scrutiny (cf Borofsky 1994; Fox 1991; Rosaldo 1989). Abu-Lughod (1991) argued strongly against the methodology of holism which, she maintains, contributes to the perception of culture as a coherent and discrete whole. In an essay on the subject of the impact of popular television, Abu-Lughod (1999) discussed the way in which television provides a platform for intersecting and blending the differentiated local meaning systems with transnational concerns and therefore unsettles the idea of cultural boundaries.

Because of the notion of a distinct "local culture", anthropologists also tend to give prominence to a microscopic view and place more emphasis on the differences between so-called homogenised cultures. Criticism of this idea has become something of a commonplace in anthropology in the last few decades. For example, in an earlier publication, Asad (1979) criticised British anthropologists for seeking to present culture as a unique, integrated and authentic entity without addressing the particular economic and political forces which cause major internal changes in cultures. The work of Jean Comaroff (1985) among a Tswana group, the Tshidi Barolong, represents the type of ethnography that Asad was looking for. She examined the cultural changes within an African society as they had taken place, from a precolonial stage to a peripheral position in modern, industrialised southern Africa. The pervasive influence of Christian missionaries, the impact of colonialism and eventually the radical transformation brought about by industrialisation were discussed in detail as external forces. This was combined with an in-depth interpretation of the unique cultural reactions and resistance of the Tshidi to these "agencies of the world system" (Comaroff 1985: 3).

Thus, under the influence of the general onslaughts of postmodern, reflexive and interpretative critiques, the traditional concept of culture became, in the words of James Clifford (1986: 19), "contested, temporal, and emergent" — although he admitted in a later publication: "Culture is a deeply compromised idea I cannot yet do without" (Clifford 1988: 10). Today, most anthropologists would probably agree with this statement.

Given the above-mentioned account, it is important to establish in more detail the features of culture as it is located in modern society. In contrast with the view of culture as a relatively static, integrated and bounded entity with organised economic, social, religious and political institutions sustained by individuals sharing a more or less homogeneous set of characteristics, culture is more correctly described as highly dynamic and constructed in particular times and places. Although by no means an "ultimate" or "true" conceptualisation, culture could be defined as a fluid, complex and frequently fragmented process located in meaningful actions, thoughts, objects and social interaction shared by individuals belonging to (a) particular group(s) of people. This definition is supported by certain assumptions. There is a perpetual process of interaction between human beings and culture, as well as between the human-culture-system on the one hand and the physical environment on the other. This ongoing interaction may be viewed as a process in which the actor has prominence and culture plays only a restricting but not a determining role. Actors are constantly creating, maintaining, negotiating, reflecting on and experimenting with culture. In the process of everyday life and adaptation, people make choices that could be characterised as strategic, situational, idiosyncratic and creative. The statement that culture is shared implies that individuals, in alliance with their individual selves, are human beings existing essentially in groups. Thus, culture becomes visible or public mainly through the interaction of individuals within social groups or, to a lesser extent, between individuals outside their group context.

In an effort to clarify the contribution which anthropology can make to the field of popular culture, I have selected three ideas basic to the given definition of culture, namely meaning, interaction and process. The purpose of emphasising these ideas is, *inter alia*, to illustrate the fact that the anthropological study of culture is not merely a matter of "translation" of the observable or even the imagined reality. The interpretation of culture implies an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon itself — that is, deliberation on the internal and external complexities of culture: the dimensions of meaning and structure/institutions, respectively.

The view of culture as comprising ideas, thoughts and systems of meaning is seldom questioned. Its roots go back to the beginnings of anthropology but it could safely be described as popularised by Geertz (1973: 89) who defines culture as

> ... an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic form by means of which men [*sic*] communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life.

His emphasis on the symbolic side of culture did not mean that Geertz wanted to concentrate mainly on symbols. He saw symbols purely as vehicles for meanings. From a research perspective this gave anthropologists a relatively fixed locus for culture. The problem with the image of "symbols as vehicles" was that meanings could not literally be found in symbols (Strauss & Quinn 1997: 18). In an effort to find a solution to this problem, the anthropologist Hannerz (1992: 3-4) stated that culture has two kinds of *loci*:

> On the one hand culture resides in a set of public meaningful forms, which can most often be seen or heard, or are somewhat less frequently known through touch, smell, or taste, if not through some combination of senses. On the other hand, these overt forms are rendered meaningful because human minds contain the instruments for their interpretation. The cultural flow thus consists of the externalisations of meaning which individuals produce through arrangements of overt forms, and the interpretations which individuals make of such displays — those of others as well as their own.

The idea of transformation or flow between overt forms and interpretation, or between internal and external *loci*, captures a paradox in the understanding of culture because the phenomenon appears to have a solid and recognisable form but a closer look reveals a variety of interpretations for one form, while present externalisations depend on previous interpretations as well as bringing about new ones, and some externalisations occur over and over while others are short-lived (cf Hannerz 1992).

A final example of the idea that meaning is a key to understanding culture comes from the cognitive anthropologists Strauss & Quinn (1997). Their focus, in contrast with the efforts of Geertz and Hannerz, is more on the "personal" side of meaning. They describe their view of meaning as follows:

> The meaning we will give to 'meaning' is the interpretation evoked
> in a person by an object or event at a given time (Strauss & Quinn
> 1997: 6.

Meanings arise through interaction between intrapersonal mental
structures and extrapersonal world structures. In their interpretation
of world structures individuals depend on previous interactions expe-
rienced with other people of similar life experience. These interpre-
tations may be labelled cultural meanings because they refer to shared,
recurring, common experiences (Strauss & Quinn 1997: 6).

The idea that cultural meanings are shared, should not give the
impression that individuals share alike. A great (potentially endless)
variety of interpretations exists when individuals interpret externalisa-
tions in terms of their own frames of reference. There is thus a con-
tinuous growth in the inventory of collective meanings. The impli-
cation of this process is that, over time, each individual owns a smaller
portion of the common structure of meaning. Hannerz (1992: 9) ar-
ticulates this as follows:

> Where the distribution of culture within a population is more com-
> plex, there can also be a larger combined cultural inventory. The
> individual may or may not have a direct hold on more ideas than has
> an individual involved with a simpler culture. What is more im-
> portant is that he holds a smaller fraction of the whole.

The public, interactive side of culture (actions, behaviour, objects)
is just as important as understanding the phenomenon. All these ex-
ternalisations are indeed culture, not just secondary products of ideas
and thoughts. Culture is culture because it is shared among a group
of people but more importantly because it acquires form through
people and between people. Barth (1989: 134) stated for example that

> ... meaning is a relationship between a configuration or sign and a
> viewer, not something enshrined in a particular expression.

He added further that to gain a true understanding of culture, we have
to link culture (*ie* the externalisations) with actors. Geertz (1973: 17)
also argued:

> Behaviour must be attended to [...] because it is through the flow
> of behaviour — or, more precisely, social action — that cultural
> forms find articulation.

However, Geertz was accused of interpreting and constructing at times from an external position that did not reflect the understandings and meanings entertained and communicated by the real people. A more reliable option for ascertaining the meaning of culture is to pay close attention to the suggestions embedded in the context and praxis as well as what the involved actor's own notion of an experience, knowledge or actions could be. This is especially true

> ... in a complex society where the cultural expressions and symbols that are produced are almost inexhaustibly many, elaborate and multilayered and their connection with the persons, groups and forces that produce them are far from transparent (Barth 1989: 135).

In recognising the importance of actors and their interpretations, a further comment on how they learn and act could yield a better understanding of the complexity of meaning. Quoting Bourdieu, Strauss & Quinn (1997: 44) state that actors are always constrained by their learned public culture and own experiences, but that their reactions are not based only on pre-known, fixed rules. In other words, people base their actions on knowledge gained through the less specific learning of everyday practice. The knowledge acquired in this way varies from one day to the next, although it tends to remain within the boundaries of what is culturally acceptable. The imprecision of this knowledge enables people to be flexible in their behaviour and sensitive to context. People are thus shaped by the entire sociocultural life going on around them, individualising and adapting some elements and creating new ones (cf Pitman 1989).

The processual view of culture has gained popularity in anthropology since the 1960s (Honigmann 1976). The emphasis on process was partly a reaction to the relatively static structural approach to culture. According to the latter, people are born into a culture and should adapt to its existing blueprint. Conversely, early followers of the processual approach visualised culture in a state of constantly becoming through the actions and choices of individuals (Honigmann 1976: 257). A guiding explanation in this regard was given by Wallace (1970: 22):

> Culture, as seen from this viewpoint, becomes not so much a superorganic entity, but policy, tacitly and gradually concocted by groups of people for furtherance of their interests, and contract, established by practice, between and among individuals to organise their strivings into mutually facilitating equivalence structures.

Building on the work of these predecessors, Hannerz (1992) used the concepts "cultural flow" and "distribution" to indicate the idea of process. The uneven distribution of meaning as explained by Hannerz has already been mentioned. Cultural flow or the distribution of culture takes place on two interrelated levels — first, free and reciprocal flow in the everyday activities going on in workplaces, domestic settings and neighbourhoods, and secondly, organised and deliberate cultural flow between governments and their citizens, between sellers and buyers, and between movements and nonconverts (Hannerz 1992: 46-52). Process implies an enduring interdependency between people and culture in the sense that cultural flow is channelled through people and that both the culture and the people will be affected by it. Hannerz (1992: 14) explained how people are influenced:

> As people make their contributions to that flow, they are themselves becoming constructed as individuals and social beings. Messages from others, in varied combinations and sequences, play their part in conducting them, with firmness and precision or by way of much uncertainty and drifting, to the series of stations they will occupy in life. In a process both cumulative and interactive, people make indications to one another about who they are and what other kinds of people are in their habitat, what is suitable conduct and what are desirable goals in life, and how to relate to other human beings and to the material world.

Thus, culture as a process is captured by words such as interaction, movement, experiencing, interpreting and manipulating. The scale of these processes is mostly on the local or micro-level of investigation. Sally Falk Moore (1994: 373) reminds us that culture as a process also includes the connections between the micro-level of a fieldsite and the unseen large-scale "whole" beyond the site. This "whole" could be a larger geographical region or, emphasising the political economy, it could refer to the world system. In practice, this means that analysis should pay attention to the question of the influence of the world economy on the micro-level, for example. Ortner (1984: 148) also confirms the idea of a "whole" in saying:

> The system is not broken up into units like base and superstructure, or society or culture, but is rather a relatively seamless whole.

In a later publication Ortner (1991:186) maintains that anthropology in America has undergone a shift,

> ... beginning to recognize the importance of studying the relation-
> ships between whatever unit one undertakes to study and the larger
> social and cultural universe within which it operates.

If this connection is not considered, any local study could be of only
minor importance.

4. Anthropology and popular culture

The relationship between anthropology and cultural studies is not a
central issue in this study but does require some attention in consi-
dering the contribution anthropology can make to the discipline of
popular culture. The fact that culture is a key concept in cultural an-
thropology raises the question of the nature of the differences be-
tween cultural studies and cultural anthropology in terms of the un-
derstanding of culture. Some anthropologists would argue that the
two fields share more similarities than real differences. However, the
impression is that the majority of cultural studies practitioners would
state that there is a vast difference between the two approaches. In his
influential publication, Agger (1992: 88-9) points out that, in con-
trast to the view of anthropologists and sociologists that culture is a
"monolithic and homogeneous entity", the Birmingham studies em-
phasise that culture is "differential manifestations across any given
formation and historical epoch". For the latter, "culture is not simply
received wisdom or passive experience, but a host of active interven-
tions, notably through discourse and representation". Lastly, the anthro-
pological/sociological conceptualisation of culture is supposed to stress
culture as predominantly normative, while in terms of the neo-Marxist
approach of the Birmingham thinkers, culture is "at once normative
and material practice", texts and subtexts. A discussion on the validity
of this characterisation of the anthropological understanding of culture
is beyond the scope of this article. Suffice to say that anthropologists
could justly argue that, based on this portrayal by Agger, most of the
anthropological literature on culture theory went unacknowledged in
the writings of cultural studies (cf Handler 1993). Not only was the
formulation of culture by Williams long outdated in anthropology
(Thornton 2000: 38), but by the 1990s anthropologists already had a
notion of culture as an open, highly dynamic and constructed pheno-
menon.

In a volume resulting from a research seminar in 1995 at Goldsmiths College, University of London, Nugent (1997: 4) writes on the undecided relationship between anthropology and cultural studies. In his opinion there is no obvious issue of contention between the two parties, and

> … the encounter between anthropology and cultural studies is neither life-threatening nor necessarily life-enhancing […] as yet, no formal agenda has emerged.

One can only partly agree with Nugent's view that cultural studies (including popular culture) does not pose a threat to the autonomy of anthropology. On the one hand, the research by young anthropologists, for instance on media-related subjects, has proved that anthropology could have and indeed has gained in terms of theory and epistemology, but on the other hand, because of the overlapping interests, the impression may have been created that the two fields of study are almost the same. In my opinion an observation by Howell (1997: 104) in this regard puts forward the most likely objection, namely that, from an intellectual point of view, anthropologists do not need to fear appropriation, but from the point of view of academic power-politics, anthropology may have to justify its unique contribution.

Thus, unease persists when leading anthropologists such as Marcus (quoted by Nugent 1997: 4) maintain that conventional anthropology (empirical, comparative, and orientated towards the other) will gradually become absorbed and recast as a branch of cultural studies. Defenders of the anti-cultural studies stand claim that ethnography as practised by anthropologists (cf Abu-Lughod 1999), as well as the different historical circumstances under which anthropology came into existence and developed, would make a merger of anthropology and cultural studies highly unlikely (cf Nugent 1997; Howell 1997). Whatever the specific arguments for or against amalgamation, the fact remains that anthropologists have to take cognisance of the possibilities and challenges of cultural studies (including popular culture) as a discipline. At the same time they should be aware of the need for relentless re-evaluation of their theoretical assumptions in view of the predictable uncertainty inherent in transforming from a "small to a large pond" (Rosaldo 1994: 529; Ahmed & Shore 1995: 27).

However, the anthropological study of popular culture does not have to wait (and indeed has not) for an outcome of the debate on the relationship between anthropology and cultural studies. In fact, directly and indirectly, anthropologists have studied subjects typical to the field of popular culture for decades, but it was not until the late 1980s that they systematically turned their attention to practices and products identified as popular culture. Historically anthropologists have studied subjects such as ceremonies, rituals, games, carnivals and theatre (cf Little 1996; Mahon 2000), but they have not called it popular culture. Instead, they have been interested in what Little (1996: 984) calls "expressive cultural practices and performances", aiming to examine the meaning of expressive forms and practices and how they symbolise deeper philosophical notions of life as understood by members of a specific social group. The influential research of Turner (1969) about religious rituals in Africa and of Geertz (1973) on Balinese cockfighting spring to mind.

In more recent years anthropologists have recognised, as Mahon (2000: 469) explains,

> ... that media and popular culture forms are anthropologically significant sites of the production and transformation of culture.

This realisation could be seen as part of the so-called repatriated or domestic anthropology that has been gaining momentum since the late 1970s (cf Marcus & Fischer 1986; Rappaport 1993). According to these authors, younger scholars became involved in this mode of ethnography in fields closer to "home" — meaning Euro-American-dominated communities/geographical areas — for various reasons. Although they studied traditional anthropological subjects such as kinship, rituals, religious cults and migrants, they also wrote rich cultural texts on ethnicity, identity, middle-class life and a variety of mass-cultural forms (Marcus & Fischer 1986: 153). The new generation of anthropologists thus made a conscious choice to study new cultural meanings, objects and identities embedded in diffuse temporal and spatial contexts.

In looking more closely at the nature of anthropological contributions to the field of popular culture it has become clear that anthropologists were influenced by both diverse and overlapping intellectual legacies from in- and outside the discipline. Some of these ethnogra-

phies were concerned with the internal debate of representation, but in general they did not differ greatly from the majority of anthropological studies in terms of approach (cf Ginsburg *et al* 2002; Wright 1998). Another group of anthropologists within the field of visual anthropology (especially those interested in media) turned towards the interdisciplinary field of cultural studies for inspiration. These studies followed the approach of the British cultural studies movement with the explicit purpose of focusing on cultural hegemony (cf Askew 2002; Ginsburg *et al* 2002). They are thus characterised by interests and arguments based both in anthropology and in cultural studies.

Anthropological writings on the media present an excellent example of the way in which anthropologists approach subjects typical to the field of popular culture. The studies cover a variety of subjects, for example, media production, circulation, reception on the local, regional, national and trans-national levels, the social impact and cultural meaning of the media in the everyday lives of people, and the study of the physical and sensory properties of media technologies themselves (cf Askew 2002; Ginsburg *et al* 2002). Within this variety two types of studies predominate. First, an important set of studies represents the more classical approach in focusing on media production. This work examines the processes through which individuals and groups produce texts and performances, as well as the complexity of institutions involved in these practices. The tension between economic forces, dominant political systems, audience reception and reaction and aesthetic considerations is also emphasised. The research assumes a socio-political separation between producers and consumers and generally focuses on one or the other of these poles, although not exclusively (cf Askew 2002; Ginsburg *et al* 2002; Mahon 2000). For example, Abu-Lughod (1995) was interested in the agendas of the producers of soap operas for Egyptian television, while Karp & Lavine (1991) made an intensive study of the role of politics in the exhibitions of cultures at museums. On the consumer/reception side of the continuum, anthropological studies showed how Hollywood films (especially action films) were re-interpreted and experienced as performances similar to traditional forms of entertainment (cf Hahn 2002) or how isolated villagers in Papua New Guinea ignored the intended narrative and filmic presentation and reassembled and transformed the film content to satisfy their views and to fit into their village life (cf Kulick & Wilson 2002).

A second group of studies focuses mainly on indigenous media ranging from small-scale community-based videos to broadcast quality television, and even to major independent art films (Ginsburg *et al* 2002: 9). These studies could be characterised as cultural activism because local producers consciously organise music, films, video or visual art not only as artistic expression but also as a form of criticism and mobilisation. The research emphasises, for example, how politically marginalised groups (in most cases non-European and indigenous to geographical areas such as the USA, Australia, Brazil and Africa) use cultural productions to mobilise and to resist the dominant forces of colonialism, decolonisation and globalisation. The media may also be used as means of collective self-expression and to revitalise group identity. For instance, videos of elders narrating stories and retelling histories from an indigenous point of view are utilised as evidence in claims for land or cultural rights (cf Ginsburg 2002; Prins 2002). One of the outstanding anthropological contributions in the South African context is the work of Coplan (1985; 1987; 1991) on popular music. In an extensive historical overview, Coplan (1985) discusses the popular music and performances of urban Africans which reveal their experiences, attitudes and reactions to industrialisation and political oppression. His later publications (Coplan 1987, 1991) focus on the analysis of Lesotho migrants' songs based on their experience of working in gold mines in South Africa.

Taking both these groups of studies into consideration, the unique contribution of anthropologists to media studies in particular and popular culture in general is their predominant focus on the social actors involved in using, interpreting and creating products. Mahon (2000: 469) states that the main concern of anthropologists working in the field of media and popular cultural forms is

> social practice, *ie* the ways in which people use these forms and technologies to construct, articulate, and disseminate ideologies about identity, community, difference, nation, and politics, and their impact on social relations, social formation, and social meanings.

In a publication on the anthropology of the media, Askew (2002: 3) confirms this chief interest, defining media anthropology as comprising

> ... ethnographically informed, historically grounded, and context-sensitive analyses of the ways in which people use and make sense of media technologies.

Apart from this main emphasis on the social actor it is clear that anthropological work on the media has made use of a modern concept of culture that is compatible with that described in this paper. It is a concept that knows no boundaries of place and time because media practices have become part of the daily practice and discourse of people all over the world. At the same time, as Askew (2002: 10) has indicated, anthropologists have held fast to one of the discipline's cornerstones in highlighting the interconnections between media practices and cultural frames of reference. The media is seen as simply another aspect of contemporary life.

Hand-in-hand with the opening up of the concept of culture comes the inclination to expand ethnographic research to relatively unfamiliar and interdisciplinary fields of knowledge in modern society. With regard to research strategies, media studies is multi-sited, which means that the researcher has to follow connections, associations and alleged relationships (cf Marcus 1995) within a context, for instance, that of national television production and reception. The challenge of situating an object, event or process as social practice within shifting political and cultural frames (cf Ginsburg 1994) will also have to form the approach for studying most other subjects within the field of popular culture. Furthermore, even though some of the research is interdisciplinary and done from a perspective described as global, cross-cultural research is fundamental to the anthropological contribution. In this way the media industry has become progressively aware of the diversity of media and consumer preferences worldwide (cf Askew 2002). Lastly, the emphasis on rigorous and imaginative ethnographic research which offers profound insights into the human condition is just as relevant in popular cultural studies as it is basic to anthropology. One way of attaining this is to follow the advice of Abu-Lughod (1999: 113), who indicated that the study of television, for example, should be situated within the rich social and cultural contexts that have always sustained anthropological fieldwork and which were the discipline's ideal for almost the entire twentieth century.

4. Conclusion

The first purpose of this article was to give a brief overview of cultural studies and of the development of ideas on popular culture. It is clear that practitioners of this interdisciplinary domain make use of a restricted concept of culture and are only interested in some of the aspects of culture as defined by anthropologists (Kuper 1999: 231). Furthermore, although some exponents of cultural studies follow a milder, uncritical, so-called populist approach, the majority of writings see popular culture almost exclusively as a vehicle for political contest, struggle and resistance. In general this emphasis is not totally without merit but, as the second section of this paper shows, the anthropological perspective on culture strives towards a more nuanced study of culture. From the review of the three selected ideas within the definition of culture, namely meaning, interaction and process, two conclusions are relevant: on the one hand, the three ideas illustrate the versatility of the concept of culture in terms of context and approach, and on the other hand they indicate (partly in reply to critics outside the discipline) that anthropologists indeed have much to contribute to the cultural understanding of modern society.

When an anthropologist ventures into the research field of popular culture the central issue is not to decide for or against a critical approach. As this article's discussion on media studies in anthropology has shown, anthropologists have already contributed leading studies to both streams of thought. The real issue is whether anthropologists can produce research that will be sensitive to the complex cultural concept defined early in this article and able to accommodate the demands of multi-sited ethnography. In addition, there should be an emphasis on direct engagement with the people who create and consume the products of popular culture. Furthermore, anthropology should persist in producing its fine-grained ethnographic interpretations which pay attention to historical and cultural specificity while simultaneously relating the local to the larger theoretical, political, and economical whole. Such studies have always been one of the major strengths of anthropologists and have also proved to be the foundation of our contribution to the study of popular culture.

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