

4 Cultural Studies for the Masses

Distance Education and the

Open University's Ideal Student

In the fall of 1968, students in the Du Bois' Club at the City University of New York issued a petition demanding, among other things, "that the racial composition of future entering classes reflect [the racial composition] of the high school graduating classes in the city" (qtd. in Lavin, Alba, and Silberstein 9). Shortly thereafter, the Black and Puerto Rican Student Community (BPRSC) picked up these concerns and spearheaded the effort that eventually led to the occupation of buildings on City College's South Campus on April 22, 1969.¹ Declaring the establishment of the "University of Harlem," these students and others who joined their cause renewed the demand that the administration address disparities in the racial composition of the student body, that it commit itself to equitable admissions across disciplines and majors, and that it establish a separate school for Black and Puerto Rican studies (10). After two weeks of negotiations, the students agreed to leave the buildings; but when the college reopened on May 6, what had been a relatively peaceful protest turned violent. Unable to quell the troubles, President Buell Gallagher called in the police on May 8 and that afternoon, amid the fistfights and bottle throwing, the auditorium at the college's main student center was set on fire. The final decision to commit the CUNY system to open admissions was not made for another two months, but there can be little doubt that this apocalyptic scene profoundly influenced that deliberative process. Seymour Hyman, deputy chancellor, described his reaction to seeing smoke billowing from the student center: "The only question in my mind was, How can we save City College? And

the only answer was, Hell, let everybody in" (qtd. in Lavin, Alba, and Silberstein 13).²

At the same time officials from CUNY were facing student insurrection and the threat that one of their campuses might be burned to the ground, across the Atlantic officials from Britain's newly founded Open University were confronted with what can only seem, in comparison, to be a comical set of obstacles. As Walker Perry, the OU's first vice-chancellor, has described it, there was considerable discussion about where best to hold the inaugural ceremony for a university with plans to rely on the mass media of radio and television to transmit its lessons. That is, how does one install a chancellor at a university that aims to transform every living room in the nation into one of its classrooms? at a university that is meant to be everywhere and nowhere at the same time? And, more important, what does one wear to the ceremony? Should the chancellor and those in attendance don traditional academic garb? Or would such trappings simply serve to symbolically resituate the university within the very hierarchical tradition that its open admissions policy was specifically designed to disrupt? If the university was really meant to be open, wouldn't a show of pomp and circumstance at its inception send the message that the only thing *really* different about this university was its reliance on distance education (Perry 46–47)?

On the one hand, then, we have the events at City College, where curricular and administrative change was both prompted and accelerated "from below" and where the definition of "open admissions" was immediately and clearly linked to issues of racial and economic inequities. On the other hand, we have the peaceful founding of Britain's Open University, which from its originary moment was committed to allowing anyone over twenty-one years old to enroll in its courses and pursue a degree, regardless of the applicant's previous academic performance. With this preliminary juxtaposition in mind, I would like to consider the range of institutional, discursive, and disciplinary forces that simultaneously enabled and constricted the pedagogical encounter with the OU student. In order to do this, I will focus specifically on the OU's influential interdisciplinary course on popular culture, U203. I have chosen to discuss this course for a number of reasons. First, it was, according to Sean Cubitt, "the largest undergraduate take-up for any cultural studies course in the United Kingdom," reaching over 6,000 students during the period it was offered at the OU from 1982 to 1987 (90). Second, the team who created this course was headed by Tony Bennett and included many other writers and consultants who, like Ben-

nett, already had made or would soon make significant contributions to the emergent fields of cultural and media studies: Stuart Hall, Paul Willis, David Morley, Janet Woollacott, and James Donald, to name only the most prominent members.³ And, finally, because the course delivered such a large audience to this group of cutting-edge thinkers committed to recognizing the cultural and political significance of the working class, U203 provides a unique opportunity to examine intellectuals at work in the academy. In many ways, the combination of the popular course topic, the dedicated teaching staff, the nontraditional student body, and the institutional apparatus seems perfect for creating an environment where dominant academic relations might be reworked and a transformative pedagogical practice enacted—a moment, in short, when cultural studies’ potentially empowering critical approaches and materials might be disseminated to the disenfranchised at little or no cost. What could be better?

My aim in concentrating on this moment—when work in British cultural studies, moving out of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham, and work on film and media studies, moving away from the British Film Institute, coalesced and began anew at the Open University—is not to chart the inevitable decline of some pure, originary project. Rather, my overarching interest is to consider cultural studies not as a set of ideas or theories, but as an intellectual practice located in and influenced by historical conditions. It has, of course, been useful for the discipline that “cultural studies” has effloresced into an umbrella term under which many different agendas can meet and converse. But this very utility has impeded efforts to historicize the emergence of the discipline, since reference to any given version of a cultural studies project as it was understood by a specific set of scholars working on a specific course at a specific institutional location at a specific time can be discounted on the grounds that it is not the *ideal* cultural studies project. By pursuing just such a local history here, I mean to argue that no given version can be anything more than the conglomeration of a set of contingencies that includes but is not limited to the scholars engaged in the project, the institutional location where that project is realized, the students who partake in the project, the discursive preoccupations of the profession at the time, and the prevailing political and economic climate during which the project is pursued. With this in mind, we will see in what follows that U203, like all courses, is best understood as the end result of sustained efforts to negotiate such contingencies, a brokered solution forged in the midst of the always-already bureaucratized encounter between the teaching apparatus and the target population.

U203 in Institutional Context: The Interlocking Paradoxes of the Open University's Educational Mission

While open admissions at CUNY rose up from the smoldering ashes of the student auditorium, at the Open University open admissions was officially brought into being before the approving eyes of Prime Minister Harold Wilson and a host of vice-chancellors from competing British universities in July of 1969 at the ceremony installing the OU's first chancellor, Lord Geoffrey Crowther. In the end, it was decided that those officially in attendance should appear in full academic regalia because, as Vice-Chancellor Perry put it, there was a strong sense that "the students themselves would come to demand just the same sort of ceremonial as was provided¹ by any other university" (47). And so, with no students to speak for themselves, university officials had to construct a student body for whom they could then ventriloquize a set of desires. At this founding moment, the official response, both telling and seemingly inevitable, was to construct a student body desirous of conformity, official trappings, public rituals.

While this version of the OU student emphasizes a continuity of tradition between the Open University and its rivals at the face-to-face universities, another version, which stressed the uniqueness of the university's mission and its target population, surfaced at the OU's first graduation ceremony. Here, officials self-consciously put forth the image of the university as fulfilling the radical educational mission of serving the oppressed, the downtrodden, the marginal. To this end, the OU conferred honorary degrees on Paulo Freire and Richard Hoggart, figures who metonymically stand in for, respectively, liberatory pedagogical practice and the hidden potential of the working class. And, to further emphasize the university's commitment to serving students shut out from pursuing a higher education elsewhere within the British system, "Fanfare for the Common Man" was selected to accompany the student processional. It must have been an odd experience—all these students who went to school at home and studied lessons conveyed over the radio and the television, getting together for the first time to receive their credentials en masse.

The tension between these two versions of the OU student is, in fact, one of the fundamental structuring relationships that allows the OU to compete as a legitimate educational institution, for the university constantly evokes the nontraditional students who are the purported targets of its courses and, simultaneously, insists that these students have the same quotidian desires one would expect to find among students at any university.

The 1983 film *Educating Rita* captures this tension nicely: at the center of this retelling of the Pygmalion story is Susan Rita White, a twenty-six-year-old married woman from the working class who has, as she puts it, “been realizing for ages [that she was] slightly out of step” with her peers. Rita’s love of reading brings her to study literature at the OU, where her course tutor, a bitter drunk who has lost faith in the virtues of education, helps her transform herself from an irreverent respondent into a successful student who says just what’s expected of her. Thus, as the film depicts it, the university does, in fact, serve a certain sector of the working class; but it does so by engaging those students willing and able to abandon their home cultures in exchange for more “universal pleasures,” which the film defines as reading Yeats. As Rita succinctly defines her position early on in the film, “The masses—it’s not their fault, but sometimes I hate them.”

We find a similar tension between the educational mission imagined for the university and the students it was thought might be drawn to such an education in accounts of the university’s conception. As Harold Wilson, who launched the project when he became prime minister, describes the evolution of his idea for a university that would use the mass media to deliver an affordable education to the working classes,

The decision to create the Open University, then known as the “University of the Air,” was a political act. It was announced as a firm commitment of the incoming Labor Government on 8 September, 1963; the text and outline proposals had been written out by hand in less than an hour after church on the previous Easter Sunday morning. It was never party policy, nor did it feature in Labor’s election manifesto. (Wilson vii)

This story is almost too good to be true, for in it the OU emerges from impeccable lineage, the scion of Labor government concerns and Easter Sunday reveries, a utopian dream that would provide for the salvation of the working class by means of an act that was “political” without ever being “party policy.” In his alternative account, Brian MacArthur asserts that Wilson had, in fact, been thinking about a university that drew on the powers of the mass media for some time prior to that fateful Easter Sunday in 1963. Those thoughts were spurred on, in part, by his having learned during his frequent trips to the Soviet Union that 60 percent of Soviet engineering graduates got their degrees through a program that combined correspondence courses and university attendance (3). After one such trip, Wilson visited Senator William Benton in Chicago, who arranged for him to see some of the Encyclopaedia Britannica films that were used in the Chicago College of the Air. It was, in all likelihood, the combination of Wilson’s experience

in Chicago and his awareness of the great success of the Soviet system that led him to propose his own “University of the Air.”

Obviously, there’s no way of knowing when or why, “exactly,” this idea was born. For our purposes, it suffices to note the differences between these divergent efforts to locate the university’s origin on the one hand within the nexus of concerns represented by the Labor Party and Easter Sunday and, on the other, as a response to prevailing fears about recent Soviet successes in space. While there is no arguing the fact that Wilson’s election as prime minister in 1964 paved the way for establishing the OU, it is also true that when the Conservatives were voted in after the elections of 1970, the new prime minister, Edward Heath, could easily have done away with the university before it had ever admitted a single student. Indeed, Heath’s first chancellor of the exchequer, Iain McLeod, had specifically targeted the OU for budgetary extinction, saying that this “great socialist opportunity for the part-time student” had to go (qtd. in Young 69). But, as fate would have it, McLeod died after just one month in office, and Heath’s minister of education was thereafter able to successfully defend the university’s place on the governmental budget. That the OU’s savior at this moment of fiscal crises and political upheaval was none other than Margaret Thatcher should make it perfectly clear that the university’s mission and its target audience cannot be constructed as, in any way, intrinsically allied with or predisposed to a political project meant to facilitate the resurrection of the Labor Party or of socialism more generally. To the contrary, according to George Gardiner, one of Thatcher’s first biographers, the woman who came to be known as the “Iron Lady” was able to support the OU because she understood its mission to be “giving educational opportunity to those prepared to work for it” (qtd. in Young 69).

It would also be a mistake to read Thatcher’s insistence that the university be reserved for those students “prepared to work” as a Conservative shift in the university’s mission. In fact, as early as 1966, the Open University’s Planning Committee was hard at work assuring everyone concerned that although the university would rely on new teaching methods to reach a new student populace, OU students would have the same “rigorous and demanding” experience provided by other universities (qtd. in MacArthur 8). Indeed, the committee went so far as to argue that supporting distance education amounted to a kind of fiscal patriotism: “At a time when scarce capital resources must, in the national interest, be allocated with the greatest prudence, an open university could provide higher and further education for those unable to take advantage of courses in existing colleges and universities. And it could do so without requiring vast capital sums to be spent on bricks and mortar” (qtd. in MacArthur 9). In short, long before

Thatcher appeared on the scene, the Planning Committee was hard at work silencing fears that their efforts to redistribute educational opportunities to people previously excluded from the system might have profoundly disruptive social, cultural, and institutional repercussions. The OU wasn't trying to restructure class relations in Britain; it was simply promising to deliver the same high-quality educational product available at other British universities, for a fraction of the cost, to those students willing and able to make up for lost time. And what reasonable person could object to this?

When Lord Crowther stood to deliver his acceptance speech in 1969, he offered a similarly unobjectionable image of the university's mission by defining the many ways in which the new institution would be worthy of its name. Crowther asserted that by virtue of its admissions policy, it would be "open, first, as to *people*" and, because of its reliance on the media for mass communications, it would also be "open as to *places*." That is, with its campus to consist of little more than a block of offices and printing and production facilities, Crowther pictured the university with its toe touching ground in its home base of Milton Keynes, while the rest of the enterprise would be "disembodied and airborne." And in order to disseminate its lessons to the largest number of students across the widest possible area, Crowther insisted that the university would also be "open as to *methods*." "Every new form of human communication will be examined," he promised, "to see how it can be used to raise and broaden the level of human understanding." Finally, Crowther said, the university would be "open as to *ideas*," approaching the "human mind as a vessel of varying capacity" into which knowledge needs to be poured, and "as a fire that has to be set alight and blown with the divine *afflatus*" (qtd. in J. Ferguson 19–20). His remarkable speech captures the ambitious and optimistic spirit of this educational endeavor. But if we recall the contemporaneous events at CUNY, it shouldn't escape our notice that at this originary moment the student for whom this university imagined itself opening its doors was assumed to be a deracinated, locationless, disembodied being who had slipped through the gaps in an otherwise laudable system.

However necessary it was at the rhetorical level to evoke such a student, at the bureaucratic level one of the most acute challenges that confronted the original planners at the OU was how to design courses for the geographically bound, historically situated, fully embodied students who were scheduled to begin "attending" the university in the fall of 1971. This challenge was particularly daunting for two reasons. First, the teaching apparatus called for in this context was an enormous, unwieldy bureaucratic mechanism that could only be controlled by coordinating the actions of a large number of educators and

technicians working simultaneously on different parts of the course. (U203, for instance, had twenty-five “authors” and ten other members involved as editors, BBC producers, or advisors from the OU’s Institute of Educational Technology.) Each course team had to divide up the labor of writing the course books and putting them into “blocks” that could be sent through the mail at an affordable rate; designing texts that were “student active,” which would engage nontraditional students and prepare them to do well in the course; producing television and radio broadcasts that complemented the material presented in the course books; collecting and publishing “set books,” which contained additional required reading in the course; collecting and publishing supplemental material to reinforce and restate the concerns of the course in greater detail; when necessary (as was the case in U203), providing cassette tapes of recorded material discussed in the course books; planning a meaningful series of lectures and activities for the required two weeks of face-to-face meetings at summer school; designing the final exam and a series of other exams and/or Tutor Marked Assignments to be administered throughout the course to measure student progress; and, finally, in courses like U203, which required written responses from the students, providing explicit directions to the students on how to prepare the assignments and to the course tutors on how to evaluate the students’ responses. If coordinating all of this work weren’t daunting enough, course designers had the further complication of having to anticipate the needs and abilities of the kind of students it was assumed *might* enroll at the OU. And since the expense and the labor required to revise a course once it had been produced was prohibitive, given that the courses were designed to run from four to six years, it was vitally important that the course team pitch the material at the right level and in the right way. For if the course team imagined the wrong kind of student—if it aimed too high, or too low, or in the wrong direction altogether—it was a mistake the university (or, more accurately, the students enrolled in the university’s course) would have to live with for a long time.⁴

For these reasons, then, one of the OU’s highest priorities has been to track what kinds of students actually enroll in its courses. The OU’s Institute of Educational Technology (IET) provides a steady stream of statistical information regarding the students and their assessments of the OU courses, but the value of such data continues to be the subject of debate within the OU community itself. According to David Harris, as educational funds tightened up in the mid-seventies, the OU’s Regional Tutorial Services (RTS), who employed the course tutors, found themselves competing with the IET for space in the OU’s budget. Consequently, those working for the IET tried to establish the “face-to-face elements [of OU’s program]

as the least justifiable area” in the budget, arguing that the RTS was only necessary for remediating the poorest of students (Harris 52). RTS responded by drawing attention to the unreliable and inscrutable material gathered by the IET, observing that a “very low pass rate could be interpreted as an indication of ineffectiveness of the course, but equally as an indication of the unsuitability of the students” (55). Thus, although a great deal of information about the OU’s student body has been collected, there has also been substantial disagreement over how to interpret that information, as the “hard” science of market analysis at the IET has contended with the “soft” science of firsthand experience at RTS.

This aspect of the OU’s bureaucratic structure, which seems to ensure that the needs and concerns of the OU’s target population are ultimately displaced, is reinforced by the OU’s reliance on advanced technology to deliver its educational product. To begin with, the very “openness” of the university means that its professors cannot close their classroom doors and teach “in private.” Because the lectures are broadcast over the radio and television, the course team never knows which experts in the field might be checking up on their colleagues over at the OU. While this feature of the OU was celebrated by Raymond Williams, who, in an early review, praised the televised lectures for making “some aspects of the real work of universities... available for direct public observation” (“Open Teaching” 139), the drawbacks of having classes taught in this version of the panopticon soon became obvious to everyone involved: the course textbooks appeared to be written at a level to thrill the course team’s colleagues rather than to instruct the nontraditional student population thought to be taking the courses for credit. Although this apparent discrepancy between the pitch of the course materials and the students’ abilities might be seen as an unintended by-product of distance education, the following internal memo written by a social science professor at the OU, commenting on the weakness in a colleague’s course, suggests that this disjunction was considered a necessary part of OU’s pedagogical practice: “It seems to me you have made serious strategic mistakes.... In particular in making the course too easy.... Personally, I think the right answer is to bash them with something difficult, although the main justification for that is simple academic credibility... and it might be as well to think of the kind of attacks you might get [from other academics] in the educational journals and magazines” (qtd. in Harris 124 n. 13, original ellipses and brackets). Beyond impressing their colleagues in the field, there was another very good reason why the course team might feel it was necessary to “bash” their students with particularly difficult material. In the early days, the OU faced the challenging task of convincing the academic community that a degree achieved through

distance education would ever be comparable to a degree earned at one of Britain's better-known universities. While no "correspondence school" in the United States has successfully waged this battle for legitimacy, John Verduin and Thomas Clark argue in their study of distance education that the OU has succeeded where others have failed, in part because it has made its courses challenging in the ways described above and in part through its "association in the public mind with the British Broadcasting Corporation and its quality programming, the involvement of top-caliber authors and academics, political sponsorship by Lord Perry, representation on national educational and governmental committees, receipt of national research awards, and an international reputation" (113–14). Thus, the "bashing" of students by "top-caliber authors and academics" in such a public and respected arena may ultimately have helped to allay fears that the education provided at the OU significantly differed from that offered elsewhere in Britain.

The difficulty of getting direct access to the students enrolled at the OU, the disagreement about how to interpret the results of student evaluations, the ready availability of course materials to people outside the OU, and the importance of the OU's establishing itself as a viable, competitive university—these bureaucratic realities militated against the course designers focusing too much attention on the institution's pedagogical approach. And so, in effect, the interplay between the OU's institutional position and its reliance on technology meant that the student *had to be* factored out of the educational equation if the system was to run smoothly and achieve parity with the other British universities. I do not intend to imply that the OU is "uninterested" in its students, whatever that would mean. To the contrary, the OU created the IET to generate a profile of the needs and concerns of "the OU student." Having allowed 25,000 students to register for the first term in 1971, the university was particularly interested in learning more about the 20,000 students who stayed on to start the courses. Based on their original assumptions about what kind of skills and abilities the new students would bring with them to the OU, university officials had estimated that somewhere between 10 and 20 percent of the original class would end up getting a degree. However, much to the administration's surprise and delight, over 75 percent of the students in the initial batch successfully completed their first course for credit and, by 1975, 42.5 percent of the entering class had already graduated (McIntosh, with Calder and Swift 264).⁵ While officials were initially baffled by this completion rate (after all, if its students *really* were nonstandard adult learners and the OU *really* was offering a degree on par with its competitors, how could so many of its students be making it through the system?), ongoing research by McIntosh and others began

to unravel the mystery of the OU's incredible success: on further analysis, the data revealed that the university was not, in fact, attracting people who had been shut out of the educational system so much as it was reaching a special sector of the population already committed to upward social mobility.

In a preliminary study, McIntosh provided this composite portrait of the "typical" student in this class: "The typical Open University student is a man, in his thirties, in a white-collar job; although he is now apparently middle-class, his parents were probably working-class and he himself may well still call himself working-class. He has clearly already been involved in a lot of study, either 'full' or 'part-time,' and thus has been able to move on to a different sort of job from his parents" (54). After further evaluation of the statistical data available, McIntosh, Calder, and Swift were compelled to conclude that the vast majority of the students in the initial class had not actually suffered "great educational deprivation at school" (123). And, by charting the inter- and intragenerational class mobility experienced by these students, they found as well that these OU students were "clearly atypical of their peers in one critical way—in their propensity to learn" (133). Thus, as pleased as University officials were with their students' successes, these revelations about the actual attributes of the OU's student body raised some disturbing questions. Why wasn't the OU reaching more women? Why was it that less than 5 percent of the entering class were classified as having come from the working class? Why was it that the university was attracting so many teachers interested in improving their credentials and so few disenfranchised members of the broader population?

At the time this information began to come out, Vice-Chancellor Perry's first line of defense was to argue that "the original objectives [for the university] . . . make no explicit mention of any special provision for the deprived adult" (Perry 144). He then insisted that it "was much better to have as our first students a large number of school teachers who were motivated, well prepared and with time for study," rather than students from the working class, "many of whom would have been ill-prepared," because the presence of qualified teachers allowed the university to "polish" its methods and to achieve the kind of academic recognition that was so vital to its survival (144). Finally, Perry had McIntosh re tally her numbers, putting students not in their self-declared class but in the classes their fathers occupied, which immediately produced a much more satisfying picture of the student body: depending on your source, it appeared that anywhere from 60 percent to 85 percent of the student body could be said to have come from the working class (McIntosh 60–61; Perry 144). With these results in hand, Perry could safely crow that the system of education provided by the Open University

had not lowered standards to attract nontraditional students, but rather had put together “the most difficult way of getting a degree yet invented by the wit of man” (167)!⁶

As the paradoxes produced by the OU’s complex social mission pile up, they also begin to resolve one another. Although the Open University admits students on a first-come-first-served basis, it ends up not with a sampling of what many thought was its target population but with a mass of relatively well-prepared, upwardly mobile, largely male students — people, in short, rushing to be the first in line. The presence of students with this profile explains why the OU’s commitment to delivering a competitive educational product did not result in high failure rates but in a flood of newly credentialed graduates. The success of these highly committed students was further assisted by the course team’s production of study materials designed for two very different “ideal students.” As Harris explains:

In the case of the student activities in the units, “the student” is someone who wants to stop reading to reflect and pursue implications and then compare his or her thoughts with the author’s, to pursue his or her “own” interests further with extra reading in more depth, to engage critically with the material he or she encounters in the text, even to seize upon assumptions or flaws in the unit itself. . . . The student of the supplementary materials is rather different. He or she has limited time and has to “cut corners,” he or she wants the core of the argument rather than having to read any unduly “difficult” material, and he or she has a well-organized and rather calculating approach to assignments. (108)

This writing strategy provides the course team with a reasonable enough solution to the problems produced by the necessity of teaching “out in the open.” It allows them to showcase the “good” student in the most public course materials, thus promoting the image of the OU’s high seriousness and academic rigor. And it also permits them to reach out to the “resourceful” student with its supplementary materials, where all the information necessary to pass the course is presented in a more readily digestible mode, thus providing the students with another avenue to success.

By performing a small ethnographic survey of students enrolled in an education course at the OU, Harris was able to trace out the degree to which actual students used the course materials in the ways imagined by the course designers. To no one’s surprise, he discovered a general pattern of “selective neglect” with regard to how students responded to the demands of the course, a pattern perhaps best exemplified by a “Mr. Wavendon,” who paid little attention to the course’s structure or content, doing just enough

to pass and get credit toward his degree (113). What is intriguing about Harris's work is the relationship he sees between this kind of "student instrumentalism" and the business of distance education.

Both approaches have the effect of reducing academic materials to objects which are organized according to largely strategic considerations; both pursue an "efficient" approach to their given ends; both operate with an indifference to anything that cannot be operationalized as a means to those ends. Student instrumentalism as an orientation is thus a kind of deep conformity to the logic of the system after all. Far from being deviant, it is almost openly encouraged by the study guides as a necessary approach for survival in the teaching system, and is often implicit in discussions of "study skills." It is a complement to the official ideology of course production, rather than a deviant response. (118)

Thus, within a system that downplays (and in some respects actively seeks to remove) the view of education as interactive, the students themselves reject interacting with the assigned material in their courses in favor of readily conforming to the systemic demand that they produce the easily evaluated, regulated, and monitored responses solicited for credit. In other words, the system has not failed when it confers its credentials of distinction on those students primarily concerned with getting the assigned material to divulge the "right" answers. What has happened, rather, is that the system has fully realized its own internal logic, ensuring that only those students, in Thatcher's words, "prepared to work" within this instrumentalist mode can continue the advance toward their degrees.

Thus, despite its rhetoric of "openness," the OU can be seen to be fully implicated in higher education's fundamentally conservative agenda; but what about U203 and its seemingly radical course content? Could such a course, on the basis of its subject matter alone, bypass the historical, structural, and technological constraints of the OU in the late seventies and early eighties to provide an oppositional education experience? To answer this question—indeed, to see if this is even the right question to pose—we need first to consider what other resources the course team members were able to draw on in their efforts to address the institutional necessity of commodifying both students and knowledge. That is, if, at some level, the OU required an instrumentalist pedagogy, then we should determine how the question of the relationship between pedagogical practice and institutional mission was being handled in the larger community of those involved in film, media, and cultural studies. Did the thinking in these areas work with or against the model of pedagogical practice adopted at the media-oriented

Open University? As it so happens, in the years just before the creation of U203, the two media journals, *Screen* and *Screen Education*, carried on a set of heated debates about the importance of pedagogical concerns to the business of producing and disseminating critical knowledge. It is to those debates that we must next turn our attention.

U203 in Discursive Context: Arguing for the Sake of Theory at *Screen* and *Screen Education*

In 1971, the same year the OU's first courses were broadcast, the Society for Education in Film and Television (SEFT) began publishing *Screen Education Notes* as an adjunct to *Screen*, its journal devoted to scholarly work on film and television studies. The earliest issues of *Screen Education Notes* provided a place for teachers developing courses in the emergent fields of film and media studies to discuss the practical problems involved in bringing the examination of the visual media into the classroom: the journal's articles disseminated information about available material, where it was to be found, and how to get access to it; they included sample syllabi for other teachers to model; they suggested ways to evaluate student film productions and to establish equivalences between such "practical work," as it was called, and the more traditional work of student essays; and they offered strategies for addressing the problems of administering examinations given the scarcity of materials and—these being the days prior to the proliferation of VCRs—the impossibility of re-viewing the films.⁷ All of this curricular work was crucial for beginning the battle to open an independent institutional space for the study of visual media. If this battle was to be won, however, more had to be done than produce imaginary syllabi and possible examination policies: if the new area was to justify its existence, it had to constitute for itself an object of study and an array of analytic skills not adequately covered by the other academic disciplines.

With just such a goal in mind, Tom Ryall argued, in his 1973 *Screen Education Notes* editorial, for the necessity of establishing a discipline that "attempts to develop student's visual literacy, their ability to make their own 'reading' of a film" (2). Ryall's proposal, which imagined the new discipline's job as developing abilities the students already possessed, differs considerably from the one staked out by Manuel Alvarado and Richard Collins in their editorial, which declared a new mission for the newly titled *Screen Education* in 1975: "The ambit that we are defining for ourselves in this issue and for future work is a large one—consideration of the relations between mass communications, particularly TV, and their containing cul-

ture—the social and political relations they constitute, reinforce or inhibit” (2). Although Alvarado and Collins were careful to avoid the term “visual literacy,” their new project for the journal assumed that being “literate” in the media requires an ability to read the relationship between the image as broadcast and the image’s “containing culture.” This way of describing the object to be studied shifts attention away from working directly with how students make sense of the media onto the new terrain of structural and ideological critique. And, as Alvarado and Collins readily acknowledged, such a shift was not without its difficulties: “Only fairly recently has a concern with film analysis as part of a more general concern with ideology and social relations reached the agenda—and then expensively armored with a tough theoretical carapace” (3). These editorials, separated by just two years, capture the journal’s dual, and perhaps irreconcilable, commitments to something that sounds as rudimentary as “visual literacy,” on the one hand, and to something as seemingly daunting as theories about the interplay of ideology, psychoanalysis, and social relations, on the other.⁸

In the following issue, the editors at *Screen Education* took the remarkable step of acknowledging that “many gaps, confusions, and contradictions underlie the range of articles that we have published over the last 15 months” (Alvarado, Bazalgette, and Hillier 1). To throw some light on the journal’s conflicting inclinations, the editors invited an educational sociologist to write an article evaluating the state of *Screen Education* and of media studies more generally. Nell Keddie’s analysis, titled “What Are the Criteria for Relevance?” located a fundamental contradiction in the emergent discipline’s effort to express “a radical social philosophy within an education system committed to traditional liberal values” (5). This contradiction manifests itself most clearly, Keddie asserted, in the journal’s general reluctance to publish articles that argued for the emergent discipline on the grounds of its relevance to students’ lives. Keddie explained the source of this reluctance as follows:

Such a claim may involve opting for low academic status on the one hand and for a commitment to the status quo on the other.... [Thus w]hen it is argued that film should not be relegated to a place as illustrative material in Social Studies or English, the rejection of its superficial social relevance is made to suggest a more serious and fundamental relevance. Analysis of the constituent images of film in terms of coding, where the codes are situated in terms of interests arising from control of the means of production, involves serious political education. (10)

Keddie’s diagnosis helps explain the eventual failure of “screen education” to name the new field of study, of “visual literacy” to name what those en-

gaged in it acquire, and, finally, of “practical work” to name what takes place in that field.⁹ In each case, the term in question drew the emergent discipline in the direction of what Keddie describes as “low-status work for the less able” (10), a place, apparently, where those committed to “serious political education” would not be in a position to achieve their larger political goals.¹⁰

Insisting that films are, first and foremost, “moving and exciting experiences,” Keddie closes with a warning about the potentially alienating aspects of the emergent discipline’s methodology:

It strikes me that very little attention is given to the quality of this experience in the accounts of film teaching that I have read. . . . What bothers me is that the notion that film is not to be treated as transparent might lead to a premature formal analysis of a film before the student has had time to become aware of the nature of his own response which has been characterized as “intuitive.” It would be folly to exchange knowingness for response. If you concentrate on the 70 odd changes of camera angle in the 45 seconds of the shower murder in *Psycho*, you effectively alienate yourself from the horror of the killing. (11)

As it turns out, Keddie was not alone in fearing that the analytical tools brought to bear on the media might effectively remove the student’s response from the classroom and therefore undermine the new field’s stated commitment to truly “serious, political education.” In fact, just a few months after Keddie’s article appeared, at a time when the editors and writers for *Screen Education* were forging ahead with their efforts to acquire the “tough, expensively armored carapace” that would enable them to participate in discussions about the ideological powers of the media, a curious thing happened: the editorial board at *Screen*, SEFT’s theoretically oriented journal, found itself unable to contain an internal disagreement about what role theory should play in the study of media.

The problems on *Screen*’s editorial board surfaced publicly at the end of 1975, when four of its members—Edward Buscombe, Christopher Gledhill, Alan Lovell, and Christopher Williams—coauthored an essay published in the journal that was highly critical of the influence that psychoanalytic theory exercised generally over film and media studies and over the articles in *Screen*, in particular. Specifically, they argued that the Lacanian and Freudian psychoanalytic paradigms had been uncritically accepted by most of the film and media studies community, that many of the applications of these psychoanalytic models to film were unintelligible, and, finally, that the

validity of such applications had not been satisfactorily determined (“Statement” 119). Asserting that the journal was in danger of losing its readers actively involved in education because of its heavy reliance on such shoddy intellectual work, the coauthors predicted a near-certain future, when the journal “would drift into a cultural void and become a conventional academic magazine with a ‘leftist’ coloring and no political situation in which it can specifically engage” (123). Concluding with a call for a reconsideration of the power of psychoanalytic criticism to disable the educational process, the coauthors suggested that Lacan should serve as a starting point for such an examination since they “believe[d] that no socialist educationalist could be happy with Lacan’s authoritarian account of the learning process” (130).

When it became clear that no official response to this critique was forthcoming, the four quickly penned another article, straightforwardly titled “Why We Have Resigned from the Board of *Screen*.” While they were ready to concede that SEFT’s original project in establishing the journal had never been to provide a forum for work that could be “immediately applied” to the classroom, the coauthors nonetheless insisted that the society certainly had intended that “the question of the relationship between work on film theory and the concerns of teachers should always be present in the mind of the board and should inflect its work” (“Why” 107). That *Screen* had failed to keep this relationship in mind was evident, they felt, in three ways: the journal was “*unnecessarily obscure and inaccessible*”; its reliance on “*politico-cultural analysis... [was] intellectually unsound and unproductive*”; and, finally, the journal had “*no serious interest in educational matters*” (107–8, original emphasis). In expanding this critique, they made it clear that they felt the journal’s failings extended beyond the heavy reliance on psychoanalytic theory into the overall engagement in “politico-cultural analysis,” which manifested itself in the journal’s general reliance on “Althusserian Marxism, semiology, psychoanalysis and avant-gardism” (109). And, as far as the resignation signatories were concerned, the turn to this brand of theory had become an excuse for ignoring the question of what place “educational matters” should have in the emergent disciplines of film, media, and cultural studies.

In their seven-page rejoinder to the resignation article, the remaining members of *Screen*’s editorial board allowed but one paragraph of response to this final charge.¹¹ They “categorically refused” this accusation on the grounds that they were “not ignorant of educational theory but *deeply critical of it in its present forms*” (Brewster et al. 116, original emphasis). That the board declined to engage this charge is, perhaps, understandable. After all, given their colleagues’ suspicions, how could they provide evidence of a “se-

rious interest in educational matters”? And yet, it is not so easy to understand the board’s outright refusal to consider ways of articulating a more readily discernible position with regard to education: that is, why did they remain silent about how their theoretical work had been or could be of estimable use to teachers?¹² However the board might have responded to this question, it was clear enough from their extended rebuttals of the other two charges that they were not about to see the journal abandon its work with psychoanalysis, semiotics, ideological critique, or linguistics in favor of work more overtly linked with what the resigning editors had termed “the concerns of teachers.”

As stark as this breakdown in communication was, it would be a mistake, I believe, to read this editorial rift as *the* defining moment in the history of the disciplinary formation of film and media studies—that moment when theory and practice broke contact and went their separate ways. Indeed, one of the remaining board members at *Screen*, Colin MacCabe, has stated that at the time, the project of transforming the journal into a “theoretical magazine” was seen to be a “pressing necessity for teachers” who found themselves faced with the “problems of reconciling film with traditional conceptions of art” (4). *Screen* helped such teachers, MacCabe argues, because it equipped them with a theoretical basis and a practical program for “revitalizing and redefining the socialist project for society,” which was accomplished by uniting Lacanian psychoanalysis with Brecht’s notion of the epic theater (5). Such theoretical work, with its focus on films that broke with dominant narrative and cinematic codes, was seen to be useful to teachers in two ways: it provided them with a new aesthetic for discussing film and it allowed them a way to define their work as assisting in the production of new, counterhegemonic subjects ready to participate in the resurrection of the socialist project for society.

As exciting as MacCabe found such work at the time, in retrospect he has conceded that it ultimately ended up serving to revalorize the avant-garde and thus roundly failed to assist teachers in the ways it had promised: “For those teachers who had looked to film theory to break out of the high art enclave, [the linkage of Lacan and Brecht] had led firmly back there, albeit in a highly politicized version” (11). According to MacCabe, it was “this pattern of evaluation of the cinema [i.e., valorizing the avant-garde and denigrating the works from Hollywood] which provided the most important area of disagreement when, in 1976, four of the board members most closely associated with secondary education chose both to resign from the magazine and to fight a campaign to gain control of [SEFT]” (11). And yet, despite observing that the journal failed to deliver on its pedagogical pro-

mises, MacCabe then devotes the remainder of his account of the events to recasting and responding to the debate over psychoanalysis, never once mentioning that fully a third of the resigning board members' critique concerned the question of what educational role the journal was meant to play. MacCabe's silence here does more than simply replay the silence that this part of the critique received a decade before: it dramatizes the lasting incommensurability of these two divergent understandings of how *Screen* could best meet the educational needs and demands of teachers in the field.

Nevertheless, MacCabe's essay also provides a candid insider's assessment of what the loss of the dissenting board members meant to the theoretical and intellectual vitality of the journal. For, according to MacCabe, not only did the board at *Screen* lose "its balance both in relation to those engaged in secondary education and those committed to Hollywood," it also found itself in the years immediately following the resignation "locked into bitter internal debate," with much of its "original energy and excitement . . . reformed in the society's new magazine *Screen Education* where concerns both with secondary teaching and popular culture were very much to the fore" (12). Thus, MacCabe's account suggests that this editorial disagreement at *Screen* did not signal a watershed event where theorists and practitioners went their separate ways. Rather, it marked a moment in the history of the emergent disciplines of film, media, and cultural studies when two different definitions of theory sought to part company—with politicized readings of films ending up at *Screen* and work on popular culture and education finding a temporary home at *Screen Education*.¹³

Before concluding my discussion of *Screen Education*, I would like to briefly consider the journal at the moment of its evanescence, just before it was merged into *Screen* in 1982—the very year that U203 made its initial appearance on TV screens and in mail boxes across Britain. *Screen Education*'s editorial mission changed frequently after 1976, and by the spring of 1981 the journal saw fit to devote an entire issue to "Pedagogics: Practices and Problems" because, as Angela McRobbie put it, "recent, even radical pedagogic discourses" had neglected to discuss the role of the teacher and the "play for power" in the classroom (2). Included in this issue is Bob Ferguson's essay "Practical Work and Pedagogy," which delineates the problems that arise when the means of production, in this case video cameras, are placed in the students' hands. Noting that most students, when left to their own devices, simply point the cameras and begin filming, Ferguson takes some time to discuss one of his student's efforts to put together a sort of video talk show about skateboarding. Although Fer-

guson found the video itself visually uninteresting, he nevertheless insists that the halting, stumbling narrative that accompanied it captured a moment when *writing* took on a new meaning for the working-class student: “I would venture to suggest that the script was probably the first piece of purposeful writing the student had ever undertaken. He actually *needed* it in order to facilitate a piece of communication” (52–53, original emphasis). By making his students’ material and his own way of reading that material available for discussion, Ferguson provided a version of “critical pedagogy” that had, up to that point, received little attention in either *Screen* or *Screen Education*. That is, by opening the door on his classroom so that his readers could see how he theorized his practice and how he practiced his theory, Ferguson occupied a position less easily read as either just the place of practice (discussions of syllabi, examination procedures, “teaching tips”) or just the place of theory (discussions of intervention, struggle, radical politics).

It’s hard to say how Ferguson’s article was received. The only evidence available is the one response it elicited in the journal: Andrew Bethell’s sarcastic riposte, in reference to Ferguson’s discussion of the video on skateboarding, that “apparently, this boy’s fumbling attempts to sound like Robert Robinson [a popular sportscaster] is what real Media Studies and English teaching should be about” (77). Bethell went on to assert that only an “ill-informed and somewhat arrogant assumption” about the primacy of Standard English would allow a teacher to praise this working-class student’s efforts to use a language other than his own (77). And thus, for a brief moment, Ferguson’s work provided the occasion for a concrete examination of how ideology informs the evaluative process in the classroom. But whether or not this interchange helped to shift the focus of discussion toward the problems involved in soliciting, reading, and evaluating student work, it was a direction the journal or its readers were unable to pursue: Bethell’s reply appeared in the journal’s final issue. In 1982, the economic recession “forced SEFT to reconsider its publication strategy,” as *Screen* editor Mark Nash put it (6). As a result, *Screen Education* was merged into *Screen* and the editors of the resultant hybrid, clumsily titled *Screen Incorporating Screen Education*, have allowed pedagogical concerns to quietly recede from the journal’s pages.¹⁴ Thus, just as the largest course ever to be taught on popular culture in Britain was about to be broadcast out of the Open University and across the British airwaves for the first time—at a time, in other words, when student work on the visual media was being solicited and responded to on a scale never before imagined—the journal devoted to providing a forum for discussing issues related to screen education flatlined.

However great the symbolic irony may be, we should not allow the irony or the coincidence of these events to seduce us into believing that all discussion of pedagogical issues in relation to media studies came to an abrupt end. Rather, I have staged *Screen Education's* disappearance in this way simply to highlight the discursive conflicts and collapses that accompanied the emergence of the disciplines of film, media, and cultural studies during the time that immediately preceded and then followed the initial offering of U203. I have also meant to suggest that the problematic positioning of pedagogy at the OU was reinforced and replicated at the discursive level in the debates at *Screen* and *Screen Education*, for at both journals, as at the university, one finds considerable discomfort over what role to accord educational concerns in emergent work with and on the media. As we have seen, the discussions at these two journals circulated around the question of what kind of study of the visual media ought to be legitimated: Althusser and ideology or Lacan and psychoanalysis? "visual literacy" or that "tough, expensively armored carapace" of theory? And the two journals were concerned, as well, with the question of whether the relevance of such study should be understood in terms of its immediate accessibility or in terms of its ability to deliver a "serious political education." These are the central terms, figures, oppositions, and options that marked the terrain of film, media, and cultural studies when the OU began broadcasting U203 in 1982.¹⁵ And now, having traced the borders of one of U203's discursive contexts and having considered the ways in which U203's home institution shaped the encounter between the students and the course, we are in a position to consider the course itself as both the product of and a response to these institutional and discursive forces.

The Teaching Machine at Work: Studying Popular Culture at the Open University

The following "advertisement" for U203 appeared in the OU's house newspaper, *Sesame*, in June of 1981, hyping the course prior to its initial offering in 1982: "*Popular Culture* will offer you the opportunity of standing back from your day-to-day familiarity with popular culture in order to think critically about the ways in which it influences your thoughts and feelings as well as about its broader social and political significance" (T. Bennett, "Stand Back"). Because the course was "U-designated," signifying that it was part of the OU's new interdisciplinary area, it was particularly important that course team leader Tony Bennett make the course sound fun and attractive. Thus, although Bennett tells the students that they can ex-

pect to be taught “to think critically” about their experiences with popular culture, he concludes on an upbeat note: “I’m no doubt biased, but if I was in your shoes I’d regard [U203] as a *must*. It’s got everything. Its subject matter is intrinsically interesting. It’s just the sort of course the OU was designed for, opening up new areas of knowledge as well as making full use of the multi-media teaching system. And you’ll find it intellectually challenging and rewarding” (original emphasis). It seems like a perfect fit: a course on popular culture taught by a team of educators implicitly predisposed, through their affiliation with cultural and media studies, to view education itself as one of the principle sites where the struggle for hegemony is waged. Would they be able to overcome, through strength of will or intellectual commitment, the conservative forces of OU’s institutional structure and mount an oppositional educational experience?

The course that emerged from this collaborative effort consisted of seven “blocks” — the first offering a general overview of the themes and issues involved in the study of popular culture, the second providing a view of the historical development of popular culture in Britain, and the remaining blocks connecting popular culture to everyday life, politics and ideology, science and technology, and the state. There was also a middle block that considered the formal analysis of popular culture. The blocks were subdivided into units authored by various members of the course team and the readings in these units were then further supplemented by all the materials previously discussed — televised lectures, radio broadcasts, cassette recordings for the musical sections, meetings with course tutors, and the assignment of additional articles from the “set” books. It was, without question, the largest undertaking of its kind and, as we will see, one not without its problems.

To begin with, “exit polls” measuring students’ response to the course suggest that they felt that there was a considerable disparity between the product they had been promised and the one they actually received. In summarizing the students’ evaluations of the course as a whole during its first year, Bob Womphrey and Robin Mason of the OU’s IET Survey Research Department record that just 36 percent of those students who completed the course found its content and only 16 percent found the approach similar to what they had expected. A full 86 percent of those polled found the course, in general, more difficult than they had anticipated. And when the students were further queried on how they felt about the content and the approach of the course, regardless of their initial expectations, 69 percent of those who completed the course had either a negative or neutral response to its approach and 45 percent recorded a negative or neutral response

to its content (Womphrey and Mason 2). While these final evaluations, like all such assessments, are hardly definitive, it is certainly clear that the course did not enjoy anything like a high level of “popularity” during its first year. What happened? Why was it that so many students found this course on popular culture so profoundly unpalatable?¹⁶ Was the course “falsely advertised,” as Gerry and Pat O’Brien, two of the original U203 students, charged in a letter to *Sesame*? Had the course team really promised, as these students claimed, to deliver “a light, interesting course” and then served up the findings of a bunch of “crazed Marxists” who were bent on showing that “inside the body of a popular TV series was hidden a structural linguist, ready to destroy any human he met with his deadly jargon and impenetrable phrases” (O’Brien and O’Brien)?

Although the O’Briens seemed to have missed this point, it is safe to say that one of the central projects of U203 was to problematize assumptions like theirs that popular culture is best thought of as the space of pure, innocent fun where success is measured in terms of the size and volume of the audience’s response. In fact, the principal difficulty that confronted the course team as it began to put U203 together was how to respond to such efforts to strip popular culture of its larger political significance. In his essay “Popular Culture: ‘A Teaching Object,’” which appeared in *Screen Education* in 1980, Tony Bennett explained that the course team rejected definitions of popular culture as either something “liked by a lot of people” or as a kind of folk, alternative culture opposed to mass culture; they preferred instead to think of popular culture as an “area of exchange” and “a network of relationships” where the dominant class’ struggle for hegemony is waged (25). Reading popular culture in terms of Gramsci’s conception of hegemony, Bennett maintained, had the advantage of enabling one to see popular culture as “one of the primary sites upon which the ideological struggle for the construction of class alliances or the production of consent, active or passive, is conducted” (26). While this approach to popular culture has since become a central premise of much work in cultural studies, what is striking about its appearance here is that Bennett argues for appropriating the Gramscian paradigm on *pedagogical* grounds: in Bennett’s terms, this approach “puts one—directly and immediately—into the business of teaching processes, relationships and transactions and to doing so historically” (28).

With this claim in mind, it seems best to approach the course itself as just such an “area of exchange” and to consider the “network of relations” internal to the course that constrained and controlled the kind of exchanges that could occur between U203’s course designers and their students. As we’ve

already seen, Bennett felt that the course should set itself over against “commonsense” definitions of popular culture that students themselves would bring to it. Bennett has subsequently stated that the course team’s thoughts about how best to approach the study of popular culture were considerably influenced by the writings of Stuart Hall, the former director of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham, who joined the faculty at the OU and served as an advisor to the U203 course team (“Out in the Open” 137).¹⁷ And in “Notes on Deconstructing ‘The Popular,’” we get a glimpse of how Hall justified devoting his attention to popular culture:

Popular culture is one of the sites where this struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged: it is also the stake to be won or lost *in* that struggle. It is the arena of consent and resistance. It is partly where hegemony arises, and where it is secured. It is not a sphere where socialism, a socialist culture—already fully formed—might be simply “expressed.” But it is one of the places where socialism might be constituted. That is why “popular culture” matters. Otherwise, to tell you the truth, I don’t give a damn about it. (239, original emphasis)

One cannot help but wonder what might have happened if such sentiments had been openly expressed in the advertisement for the course. Although Bennett himself has gone on record as regretting that Hall allowed this final sentiment to appear in the printed version of his talk, since it was “clearly a throwaway line made in the context of the cut-and-thrust of debate” (“Out in the Open” 137), the truth of the matter, as we will see, is that many students and reviewers of U203 sensed that such political sentiments rested at the course’s core. Thus, those students who had enrolled in U203 because they, too, found “the subject matter . . . intrinsically interesting,” were undoubtedly in for a surprise, for what awaited them was a course that, in the main, didn’t “give a damn” about popular culture except as a site “where socialism might be constituted.”

This particular disjunction between the desires of some of U203’s course planners and the interests of many of the course’s potential students was picked up on in reviews of the course as it was going into production and during the time it was broadcast. Iain Chambers argued that Bennett appeared “to be arranging the potential definitions of ‘popular culture’ around an assumed—we might even say taken-for-granted—measure: working class culture” (113). John Thompson, reviewing the set books for the course, noted a generally negative assessment of the products and the social function of popular culture and warned that students were in for a long bout with some “strangely colorless and solemn writing” (52). Sean

Cubitt, in his failed attempt to rally support for the course in 1987, had to acknowledge “the highly structured, if at times patronizing, way in which the materials are presented” (91). And finally, once the course had been canceled, Alan O’Shea and Bill Schwartz commented on U203’s “overly rationalistic ambition,” its “dedication to an integrated and totalizing theory,” and the fact that its “students found the work heavy going—often far removed from their own experiences of popular culture” (105).¹⁸ That so many scholars felt compelled to comment on the course’s content and approach is a testament to U203’s larger importance in the media, film, and cultural studies communities. But the gist of these comments attests to a general perception about the stance the course team had adopted toward its object of study and its students: that is, these reviewers seem to agree that the course team tended to perceive popular culture and its consumers in a negative light, that popular culture was equated with working-class culture, and that the course carried out its discussion of these matters in a manner that was alternately turgid and dogmatic.

It wasn’t only fellow scholars who perceived this marked disparity between the possible courses that might have been produced on popular culture and the actual course students ended up taking in U203. Indeed, as we have seen, as soon as the course began, students started registering their surprise and dismay at both its content and approach. In the evaluations of the course’s first block, where two units on how Christmas is celebrated around the world were followed by Bennett’s unit on “Popular Culture: History and Theory,” students had a great deal to say. With regard to the television broadcasts, one student wrote: “They related well to Tony Bennett’s approach to the course. The subtle brainwashing has started” (Womphrey, “Feedback Block 1” 7). Another wrote about the first block as a whole: “Course is not what I expected or looked forward to. Do not like patronizing, faintly disapproving almost puritanical attitude—the implication that if something is popular it must either a) have something wrong with it or b) have been imposed by ‘The Media’ ” (33). And another student, commenting on the second block, which offered a more “traditional” account of the historical development of popular culture in Britain, had this to say: “I welcomed a more sensible explanation to 19th c. pop. cult. I loathed the bias & heavy going involved in Unit 3, the ‘red’ set book and the Intro to Block 2” (Womphrey, “Feedback Block 2” 46).

The appearance of these predictable responses—as they surely must be for any teacher who has sought to introduce concepts such as hegemony, ideology, and patriarchy into the classroom—represents another force constraining the kind of exchanges possible in the course: the team’s re-

liance on a mode of presentation that was incapable of addressing the ready resistance students were bound to produce in response to the course's overarching political agenda. For it is truly a problem when a classroom is so structured that students are not allowed to do work that either they or their teachers would be likely to value. Yet these student comments could just as well be dismissed as the words of those who had not done their homework or who had done it poorly. Indeed, one could say that these comments prove how strongly the dominant ideology interpellates its subjects and, thus, that they demonstrate the urgency of making oppositional material of this kind more generally available. As with all student evaluations, it is hard to know just how much weight to give the impressions voiced by those who stand outside the system or how to use those impressions in assessing the strategies, goals, successes, and failures of the course designers. The students' responses in themselves don't provide an unmediated picture of what the course was *really* like: rather, the problems involved in interpreting these comments are the same as for any other reception data.

If the student comments are read alongside the course materials, however, it is possible to get a better sense of what work the course designers thought the students *ought* to engage in. As we have already seen, the unique structure of the OU's course team format required that authors with potentially divergent disciplinary, political, and pedagogical commitments work together to produce a unified and coherent course. This was particularly true of U203, because its status as an "interdisciplinary" course meant that the designers "had to draw on the expertise of as many as possible of the University's six Faculties—Arts, Education, Social Sciences, Science, Technology, and Mathematics" (T. Bennett, "Out in the Open" 138). And, as the course materials amply show, there was considerable disagreement among U203's course team members over what status to accord Gramsci's notion of hegemony. Evidence of Gramsci's influence on the course first appears when Bennett argues, in the concluding unit to the first block, that the concept of hegemony shows one "how to understand the ways in which the cultures and ideologies of different classes are related to one another within any given social and historical situation" ("Popular Culture: History and Theory" 29). Applying the concept of hegemony to popular culture, Bennett goes on to explain, thus allows one to escape the bind of seeing popular culture as either simply imposed "from above" or spontaneously emerging "from below," revealing it to be, instead, a historically produced and ideologically invested area of struggle. That there were others on the course team who did not share Bennett's enthusiasm for Gramsci is made clear in Bennett's introduction to block 5, "Politics, Ideology, and Pop-

ular Culture,” where he notes that the authors in block 2 “sought either to criticize or qualify the concept of hegemony in various ways” and that the authors of the third block “criticized the focus on class implied by the concept of hegemony in arguing that other social groupings—those based on age or gender, for instance—are relevant to the analysis of popular culture, and in arguing for a more pluralist conception of the make-up of society” (Introduction 3). Bennett’s response to these criticisms is telling: he devoted his unit in block 5 to refining the definition of hegemony—here it becomes an area of “*unequal exchange*”—and to insisting that events in Britain after 1966 are best read as exemplifying a contemporary crisis in hegemony (15, original emphasis).

That there was disagreement among the various camps on the course team is clear enough, but what isn’t clear is what the students were supposed to do with the skirmishes that were taking place between these blocks. In a way, the answer to this question is as straightforward as it is unfortunate: the students weren’t supposed to “do” anything with these debates at all. That is, since the seven Tutor Marked Assignments (TMAs) administered during the year respected the boundaries of the course’s seven blocks, the examination system itself prevented students from entering the fray, as it were, to address the substantially different ways in which popular culture was being constituted and studied at various points in the course. In fact, the TMAs restricted the students to reiterating the information proffered in each individual block, a situation the students commented on repeatedly in their evaluations of the course, regardless of whether the TMA in question concerned a Gramscian or a liberal-pluralist take on popular culture. In response to the TMAs in block 3, for instance, one student observed: “I have found that the wording of questions + student notes tends too much to define the parameters, at least in the mind of the tutor, within which the questions are to be answered, leaving little room for manoeuvre. Suggested approaches within the student notes turn out to be the required approach and ‘helpful’ background readings turn out to be indispensable” (Womphrey, “Feedback Block 3” 18). And another remarked: “As with previous TMA’s on U203 I feel that all the alternatives required little independent thought but required mainly a selective precis of the relevant unit. I find this quite unstimulating and find it difficult to motivate myself into writing the TMA’s” (22). Even the more positive assessments of these assignments signaled that something was amiss with this aspect of the course: “Enjoyed doing [the TMA], however it does just regurgitate the main themes in the course, i.e. concepts of Marxism” (Womphrey, “Feedback Block 2” 37).

There is nothing unusual about having students devote a lot of time to mastering the central texts and concepts in the given field of study, of course: indeed, this is a constraint that is felt in any content-based class. If the TMAs thus served as the place where the students' acquisition of the course's "main ideas" was monitored, did the course team require or allow any other kind of response from the students? Was there a moment, for instance, where the students were invited to apply the various theories about cultural production and reception to objects of their own choosing? Such work might have been initiated elsewhere in the course,¹⁹ but it certainly wasn't encouraged on the final exam. Perhaps the best way to represent the exam's shortcomings is by first considering the student who has spent an entire year working through disagreements about whether or not Gramsci's notion of hegemony provides the most useful approach to popular culture. Next, imagine that student sitting down for a three-hour written final exam composed of seventeen questions (none of which is more than two sentences long), from which the student is to select three to answer. It is the institution of the OU that brings the student to this evaluative moment, but it is the course team that provides the student with such questions as "What historical and narrative factors led to James Bond becoming a popular hero?"; "In what ways did radio broadcasting become more 'popular' during the Second World War, and why?"; and "What are the characteristics of the classic realist text?" ("Second Level Course Examination" 2). The few questions that venture beyond asking the students to restate the facts and arguments of the course verbatim run into other problems. When the student is asked to "analyze the construction of images of the nation in at least two popular cultural texts," the directions stipulate that the student "*must* refer to the cassettes, television programs (including those shown at Summer School) and radio programs for the course" (2, original emphasis). In short, none of the questions asks the students to apply the approaches learned in the course to material not specifically discussed in the course. Not once are the students asked to wander somewhere beyond the landmarks and approved positions already clearly staked out in the readings, for to solicit such a response would be to invite the students to produce material much less susceptible to the standardized protocols for assessment. Thus, the examination system played a powerful role in shaping the students' encounter with the course material, ensuring that the course itself served as one of the more familiar areas of "unequal exchange."

The course books themselves reveal a similar antipathy about inviting students to make connections between their work in U203 and their interactions with popular culture outside the course. Bennett's unit on hege-

mony in postwar Britain, for example, concludes with the assignment of Stuart Hall's seminal essay on the two paradigms of cultural studies. In the accompanying instructions, the students are first told that they "should particularly concentrate on... [Hall's] assessment of the relative strengths and weaknesses of culturalism and structuralism" ("Popular Culture and Hegemony" 28). Just below the questions for this reading assignment, these instructions are rescinded: "While it's not important that you should be concerned with the relations between 'culturalism' and 'structuralism' in a detailed way in this block, I have thought it useful to remind you of these considerations at this point so that you might be aware of, and be on the look-out for, the different directions from which particular arguments are coming" (28). Then, the "Checklist of study objectives" for the unit, which *immediately* follows this passage, reinstates the initial instructions, listing as its third objective the hope that the students will have acquired a "deeper and more finely nuanced understanding of the relationships between 'culturalism' and 'structuralism'" (29). This series of contradictory directions might be read as a sign of the course team's anxiety over ensuring that their students successfully acquired the central terms of Hall's essay. Or the contradictory instructions might be seen as evidence of the consequences of a production schedule that cannot allow time for worrying over the finer details of the course's instructional apparatus. In either case, from the students' perspective the end result is the same: little thought seems to have been given to the question of what kind of reading and writing assignments might be most productive for students just beginning work in cultural studies.

This is one more instance of the general inattention to the place of student work in U203 that we are now in a position to see pervaded the course, the surrounding institution, and the larger discursive context. Thus, by this point, it should be clear it is no accident that the course team begins to issue contradictory orders at the very moment it contemplates the possibility that students might actually *apply* the material they have studied rather than simply respeak the words they've read. Or, perhaps, it might be better to say that the course team's failure to reimagine the form and content of student work within this course was overdetermined, the seemingly inevitable by-product of the overlapping contexts with which I have been concerned throughout this chapter.²⁰ First, we have the institutional context of the Open University, which provided the team with the blueprint for designing a course that fit into the OU's curricular and assessment structure. That structure explains why the TMAs, final exams, and textually embedded reading assignments demanded nothing more from the students

than the simple repetition of the course's main tenets: this was the mode of examination most ready to hand at the OU, one that helped maintain the enabling fiction that the student work produced in these courses, though solicited from all over the country, was ultimately subject to the same, relatively stable, standardized and objective system of evaluation. As we have also seen, the discursive context at this moment served to reinforce these institutional pressures, providing an intellectual environment predisposed to favor a transmission-based model of pedagogy. And within this discursive context, there was considerable debate about the importance of theorizing cultural studies relative to the work of providing the students with an alternative educational experience. By the time U203 was being created, the debate appeared to have been so clearly won by those with exclusively theoretical commitments that pedagogical concerns were effectively tabled. For, as we've seen in this section, the course team's stance toward popular culture and its reliance on the pedagogical apparatus provided by the OU combined to ensure the delivery of an educational product whose primary features were its theoretical sophistication and the antagonism it provoked from the students.

Putting It All Together: Taking It All Apart

It would be a mistake, I believe, to accord *all* of the pedagogical problems evident in U203 to the overlapping institutional, discursive, and disciplinary pressures that so powerfully influenced the shape of the course. In fact, to do so would be to rely on a notion of determinism that cultural studies has been particularly intent on problematizing through its appropriation of the notion of "hegemony." Thus, acknowledging the collusion of these constraints in determining how the course had to be taught, which students ended up in the course, and what those students were expected to produce does not sufficiently explain the apparent failure of U203's course team to offer any significant resistance to these constraints. That is, if we think for a moment of the institutional structure of the OU as representing the forces of hegemony, then where in the popular culture course is "the struggle for and against a culture of the powerful . . . engaged," to use Stuart Hall's evocative phrase? Where is the struggle? And between which parties is it occurring?

That I have searched for resistance of this kind within the course team's pedagogical practice rather than in the "knowledge" disseminated in the course team's materials speaks to my own interested position in pursuing

this research. Focusing on cultural studies as it has been taught rather than as it has been theorized has led me to work with a set of documents currently at the margins of cultural studies' institutional history: course textbooks, examinations, student evaluations, school newspapers, and working papers on pedagogical practice. And though I have been at pains to locate the shortcomings of U203's pedagogical project within a set of local institutional, discursive, and disciplinary constraints, the critique I have mounted may well appear to imply that there exists a critical pedagogical practice that both should and could have meshed much more neatly with the overarching political commitments of cultural studies, regardless of any given individual program's institutional location. Although we have reached some understanding about why this particular course turned out the way it did, we have not seen sufficient evidence to conclude that this course was so completely determined that *no* other outcome was possible. Rather, I would argue that from a pedagogical standpoint, this moment when a group of dedicated scholars designed a course on popular culture for a technological system able to bring the insights of cultural studies to large numbers of people normally excluded from such investigations has shown itself to be a richly instructive lost opportunity. For despite cultural studies' apparent *a priori* commitment to "the people," and despite the tangible successes during the early days at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) when, in Hall's words, everyone involved in the cultural studies project was forced to abandon "the normal pedagogical relations where the teacher is supposed as the keeper of wisdom and students respond to the question 'This is so, is it not?' with that kind of compulsive drive that requires them to say, 'Of course, of course'" ("Emergence" 17),²¹ nevertheless at the time U203 was drawn up, the course members found themselves interacting with a set of constraining forces that discouraged them from seeing pedagogy as a place where theories might be tested, practice reimaged, and institutional structures and relationships renegotiated. Indeed, Bennett is unequivocal on this issue: "At no point... did Hall and I, or any other members of the course-team or core planning group, discuss or see ourselves as trying to transplant the Birmingham experiment of 'disrupting' normal pedagogical relations to the Open University context" ("Out in the Open" 139). As far as Bennett is concerned, such experimentation is best reserved, as it was at Birmingham, for the graduate seminar; there, he explains, "the divisions between teachers and taught are *supposed* to weaken, and... collaborative endeavors across this divide resulting in joint working papers, publications, seminars and the like are *supposed* to happen" (141, original emphasis).

When we keep in mind Bennett's declaration of the necessity of reserving collaborative, interactive work for those seeking to enter the profession, we see more readily that U203's course team was fashioning pedagogical solutions out of materials that were not entirely of their own making—that they, too, were controlled by the educational commonplaces and conventions of their historical moment. Of course, this insight into the dialectical tension between a people's aspirations and extant institutional constraints, which is the very foundation of Marxist thought, has yet to make itself felt either in the many calls now being made for the broad adoption of the cultural studies project or, more generally, in the ongoing celebrations of cultural studies' "critical pedagogies." As Bennett himself has recently remarked, "more interesting and more serviceable accounts [of cultural studies] will be produced only when attention shifts . . . [to] the institutional conditions of cultural studies, and especially the changing social composition of tertiary students and teachers" ("Putting Policy" 33). If my own account has helped demonstrate that the pedagogical possibilities that may once have been available in Birmingham are not the same as those subsequently available at other universities with different administrations, different institutional histories, different student bodies, and different disciplinary agendas, it has done so by attending to the very "institutional conditions of cultural studies" of which Bennett speaks.

Raymond Williams came to a similar conclusion about the OU's limited ability to enact a transformative pedagogical practice in his 1986 article "The Future of Culture Studies." Although Williams initially felt that the OU might assist in the broader project of cultural studies by bringing higher education into the homes of adult learners, as he became more familiar with the university he concluded that the technology of the enterprise militated against the project of refashioning higher education. He noted, "[The Open University] lacks to this day that crucial process of interchange and encounter between the people offering the intellectual disciplines and those using them, who have far more than a right to be tested to see if they are following them or if they are being put in a form which is convenient—when in fact they have this more basic right to define the questions" ("Future" 157). As I have detailed here, the version of cultural studies that emerged out of U203 was structurally, and perhaps theoretically, incapable of allowing students to "define the questions" or of providing a forum for "that crucial process of interchange." Indeed, U203 could itself serve as one of Williams's examples "of how in the very effort to define a clearer subject, to establish a discipline, to bring order into the work . . . the real problem of the project as a whole, which is that people's questions are

not answered by the existing distribution of the educational curriculum, can be forgotten” (160).

Bennett has rightly called Williams to task for his idealization of extra-mural education for adults and, more important, for his failure to recognize that the OU’s central achievement was “that it provided open access to degree qualifications,” a bureaucratic success that Bennett justifiably declares “wholly new and radically progressive” (“Out in the Open” 143). My own reservations about Williams’s assessment of the shortcomings of distance education take a slightly different tack, though: I want to know how he can claim that meaningful “interchanges” between the students and the instructors did not occur. Or, to put a finer point on it, how can I make the same claims about U203 in particular? To substantiate these charges, surely it would be necessary to speak with the students who actually took the course, to interview the course tutors about how they ran their sessions, and to talk with people who “poached” on the course (those who watched but didn’t enroll) about the kind of issues U203 brought into their homes. Any account of the course and of the educational experience at the Open University would seem to be incomplete without these other voices. In other words, my familiar methodological reliance on textual traces to build my case about U203 has produced an argument that points to the very limits of taking such an approach. Thus, at this point it would seem that the only way to know what “really” happened in this course is to speak directly with the people who ran the tutorials and the students who took the course. Turning to the ethnographic approach in the next chapter will enable us to see what, if anything, such talk resolves. While ethnography requires that its “informants” speak, does it, in fact, allow for that “crucial process of interchange” Williams demands? Does it allow the “informants” to define the questions that are to structure the investigation? And, if so, what is gained in the process?

Postscript

While the recent spate of budgetary cutbacks at CUNY has substantially altered its open admissions policy,²² at the Open University the debate about whether the system is or should be serving similarly nontraditional students persists to the present day. In this regard, it can hardly appear as insignificant that the OU only began to collect data on the racial and ethnic backgrounds of its students in 1989, a full eighteen years after the first students entered the system. Preliminary analysis of the data suggests that the OU has not done a good job retaining racial and ethnic minorities either as

students or as members of the university's faculty and staff (Woodley, Taylor, and Butcher 157). The authors of this study, Alan Woodley, Lee Taylor, and Bernadette Butcher, are clearly distressed by this finding, as well as by the information they've uncovered indicating that minorities in the university are much less likely to receive credit at the end of the year than other students, even when all other mitigating factors are considered. Woodley's discomfort announces itself most clearly at the end of his report:

From my own value position, I want to alert the University to the situation and to produce improvements within the system and, as an academic, I expect, and I am expected, to publish useful findings. However, as an employee of the University I have to consider how, in what form, and to whom this information should be released. The University is anxious not to receive bad publicity over what is a very sensitive issue; however, demand for the information is great from outside the university and from within, both by regional staff and by academics developing the "Race and Education" course. Therefore, the process whereby the research data become public knowledge is one of negotiation and even contestation. (167)

At this point, one can only guess what this data will reveal about the racial and ethnic backgrounds of the students who have succeeded in fitting themselves into the OU system: the implication, however, is that the data will show that the university is not and never has been as open "as to people" as Crowther's phrase might have led one to believe. And so, in a turn of events that harkens back to the revolutionary moment at CUNY, the university now finds itself considering whether or not the proportion of minority students admitted to the OU should exceed the proportion in the population at large "in order to compensate for earlier educational disadvantages within these groups" (166).

Thus, although the OU and open admissions at CUNY came into the world at roughly the same time, it is only now, after two decades, that officials at the OU have had to openly confront issues of racial difference and remediation. The research of Woodley, Taylor, and Butcher is helping the university to see that attracting and retaining minority students means not just offering courses in "Black Studies" but also putting together programs in law and accounting, and developing courses "that are designed to improve the study skills of potential students" (168). In part, the OU is able to ignore the fundamental concerns of real students in the world because it delivers its educational lessons at a distance. With a system that ensured that students could not come together and articulate a common set

of interests capable of threatening the status quo, the OU allowed the government and its educators to protect themselves from having to come face to face with difference. Thus distance learning, which is popularly thought to guarantee a “color-blind” educational experience, actually serves to conceal the fact that the university itself has not sought to make itself amenable to the needs and desires of those potential students who truly stand outside the system, because, unlike CUNY during the late sixties, it has never been forced to. Consequently, at this “disembodied and airborne” university, where open admissions has, from the beginning, been defined and managed “from above,” the result, which can only seem predictable at this point, is a system that rewards the already prepared, diligent, upwardly mobile, generally white, male student, while leaving the rest on their own to fend for themselves as best they can.