

# People and the Popular, Culture and the Cultural

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## *Abstract*

'Popular', 'culture' and 'folk' are discussed by Raymond Williams as highly charged keywords: semantically, historically and from the point of view of the various areas of research which have adopted them in their denominations. The elusive character of these terms is reflected in the many problems we encounter when exploring the field of popular culture studies. In particular, since the 1980s, neo-Marxist cultural studies historians have claimed the label of 'popular culture' for the sole study of post-industrial commercial phenomena. This exclusive identification and the comparative disregard of research on pre-industrial popular cultures has become a *doxa* in the so called 'cultural studies approach' and has also affected the field of Shakespearean studies, where 'popular' is almost exclusively connected with the 'afterlife' of Shakespeare's plays and their appropriation by the modern media. This article discusses what has been considered an 'elision of the past' performed in many recent studies, at the same time suggesting that socio-historical research on the pre-industrial and pre-commercial culture of 'the people' implies the reading of entirely different 'texts' and their different mode of transmission than the study of modern and late modern manifestations of 'popular' commercial products and their reception; and that, therefore, it requires the adoption of entirely different paradigms and methods of analysis.

*Keywords:* Culture, People, Popular Culture, Sources, Transmission.

## 1. *Definitions and Questions*

Introducing his essay 'Notes on Deconstructing "the Popular"', Stuart Hall says: '... I want to tell you some of the difficulties I have with the term "popular". I have almost as many problems with "popular" as I have with "culture". When you put the two terms together, the difficulties can be pretty horrendous' (1981, 227). Yet, what Hall means by 'popular' in connection with 'culture' is soon clear. Popular culture, he says, 'looks, in any particular period, at those forms and activities which have their roots in the social and material conditions of particular classes; which have been embodied in popular traditions and practices' (234-235). He sees the field of such forms and activities as permanently oscillating between containment and resistance, because they are permanently involved in 'a continuous and necessarily uneven and unequal struggle, by the dominant culture, constantly to disorganise and reorganise popular culture; to enclose and confine its definitions and forms within a more inclusive range of dominant forms' (233). But Hall also tackles the issue of periodization, and chooses as the period to be examined in the study

of popular culture the years which go from the 1880s to the 1920s because that period, he says, 'is one of the real test cases for the revived interest in popular culture', but mainly because of the expression, in those decades, of the relationship of the dominated class 'to a major restructuring of capital', that is, 'to a changing set of material relations and conditions' (230, 229-230).

Thus, the object of study is defined by confining it to the emergence of industrialization and the urbanization of an industrial working class, that is, not earlier than the late eighteenth century. Hall, however, goes farther than exposing and motivating his preference for the decades which go from the 1880s to the 1920s; he also expresses reservations about the study of earlier phenomena and forms:

Without in any way casting aspersions on the important historical work which has been done and remains to do on earlier periods, I do believe that many of the real difficulties (theoretical as well as empirical) will only be confronted when we begin to examine closely popular culture in a period which begins to resemble our own, which poses the same kind of interpretive problems as our own, and which is informed by our own sense of contemporary questions. (231)

In an essay which I will discuss later, L.W. Levine (1992) seems to have no doubts about the object of study of what goes under the name of 'popular culture': it is the study of the cultural products which were distributed to 'the people' during the Great Depression and after and of the way in which the addressees responded to these consumption products. In even more unambiguous terms, in a more recent essay, John Storey seems to radically exclude the possibility of research in the popular culture of past ages: 'whatever else popular culture might be', he says, 'it is definitely a culture that only emerged following industrialization and urbanization' (2001, 13).

Raymond Williams, in turn, included both 'culture' and 'popular' among the keywords he explored. His exploration of the word 'culture' starts with the assertion that '**Culture** is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language'. He, then, adds that 'This is so partly because of its intricate historical development, in several European languages, but mainly because it has now come to be used for important concepts in several distinct intellectual disciplines and in several distinct and incompatible systems of thought' (1985, 87). Two other passages in his historical and conceptual exploration of the word seem to me to be worth quoting because they illustrate points which I am going to develop in this article. The first is a quotation from Herder's *Ideas on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind* (1784-91). Herder, Williams says, wrote of *Kultur* that 'nothing is more *indeterminate* than this word, and nothing more *deceptive* than its application to all nations and periods' (89; my italics); the second is Williams's own reflection on the different ways in which different disciplines or points of view characterize the contents of the word 'culture':

... in archaeology and in *cultural anthropology* the reference to **culture** or **a culture** is primarily to *material* production, while in history and *cultural studies* the reference is primarily to *signifying* or *symbolic* systems. This often confuses but even more often conceals the central question of the relations between 'material' and 'symbolic' production, which ... have always to be related rather than contrasted. (91)<sup>1</sup>

Of 'popular', Williams registers favourable, unfavourable and neutral meanings and comments on two uses of the expression 'popular culture' saying that it 'was not identified by *the people* but by others, and it still carries two older senses: inferior kinds of work ... and work deliberately setting out to win favour'. In the treatment of the same word, we find yet another statement which illustrates a conceptual difference between what is meant by 'folk culture' and 'popular culture' in the English-speaking world: 'The sense of **popular culture** as the culture actually made by people for themselves ... relates, evidently, to Herder's sense of *Kultur des Volkes*, ... but what came through in English as *folk-culture* ... is distinguishable from recent senses of **popular culture** as contemporary as well as historical' (237). Herder's *Kultur des Volkes*, Williams seems to be saying, refers to cultural forms originating 'from below'; an idea which – in more recent senses of 'popular culture' adopted in English – is considered out-dated and residual. 'Folk' also appears as one of Williams's keywords, with observations which further explain the ideal divide between 'folk' and 'popular' in the English-speaking world. Owing to its use by eighteenth-century folklorists such as Herder and the Grimm brothers, 'folklore' ended up by being 'centred on the sense of "survivals" '; a similar residual meaning, then, started to be attributed, for instance, to the term 'folksong', which

came to be influentially specialized to the pre-industrial, pre-urban, pre-literate world, though *popular* songs, including new industrial work songs, were still being actively produced. **Folk**, in this period, had the effect of backdating all elements of *popular culture*, and was often offered as a contrast with modern popular forms, either of a radical and working-class or of a commercial kind. (137)<sup>2</sup>

Often quoted broader definitions of 'culture' are those by Clifford Geertz and Peter Burke. Geertz says that his idea of culture 'has neither multiple referents nor, so far as I can see, any unusual ambiguity'. Culture, for Geertz, 'denotes an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life' (2000, 89). Burke's definition of 'culture' refers to 'a system of shared meanings, attitudes and values, and the symbolic forms (performances, artifacts) in which they are expressed or embodied'; 'popular culture', Burke says, 'is perhaps best defined ... in a negative way as unofficial culture, the culture of the non-elite, the "subordinate classes" as Gramsci called them' (1994, xi).

The definitions and evaluations I have been quoting may appear rather random, especially since they extend over a period from 1976 (the date of publication of the first edition of Williams's book) to 2001, when John Storey's book was published. However, they illustrate problems and theoretical stumbling-blocks which still clutter the field or fields in which the study of popular culture is practised. These problems and stumbling-blocks are the issues I am going to discuss in the following pages. I am thinking, in particular, about a theoretical hypotext which runs under the surface of statements produced in the area of cultural studies when popular culture is the object of reflection: i.e. the fact that, while (rightly) affirming that interest in 'the people' started to manifest itself in the later eighteenth century, certain scholars seem not to be willing to consider the possibility of going back beyond that time in the study of phenomena which developed in a 'popular' context. Furthermore, the fact of considering only the industrial, urban and literate world worthy of reflection and examination has produced the side effect of asserting a vision of 'the people' in which they are simply (active) consumers and consequently ruling out a view of the people as possible producers of at least scraps of culture of their own. This theoretical option, furthermore, has ended up by producing a series of contradictions. While, on the one hand, analysts cannot 'deny the exploitative, manipulative tendencies of certain branches of the media and cultural industries, such as tabloid journalism, advertising and online porn' (a perspective which is present when the Gramscian formula 'hegemonic/subaltern' is evoked), they must 'give credit to, and place critical value on, the various *resignifications* and *reactivations* undertaken by audiences and consumers' (Pickering 2010, xxii; my italics).<sup>3</sup>

## 2. *Popular/Folk*

Reflecting on 'folk', Raymond Williams also discusses one of the word's uses, that recorded in a letter which, in 1846, J.M. Thoms addressed to the journal *Atheneum*. In it, Thoms gave a 'specializing' definition of 'What we in England designate as Popular Antiquities, or popular literature', saying that 'it ... would be most aptly described by a good Saxon compound, Folk-Lore – *the Lore of the People*' (187). Williams, then, writes that the Old English word *lar*, from which *lore* derives, 'had originally been used in a range of meanings from teaching and education to learning and scholarship', but from the eighteenth century had become 'specialized to the past, with the associated senses of "traditional" or "legendary"' (136). If we recall that, commenting on the word *popular*, Williams quotes Herder's sense of the expression 'Kultur des Volkes' as different from what in England are 'recent senses of **popular culture**' (237), we find a historical explanation of the fact that, in the English-speaking world, 'folk culture' and 'popular culture' ended up by designating different phenomena of a different nature, at the same time acquiring different connotations as to

the perspective from which they have been studied in time: while 'folk culture' came to be described (especially in the field of cultural studies) as a set of values and perspectives, now residual, tinged with the regressive aura of romantic nationalism and nostalgia, the expression 'popular culture' has acquired, again thanks to the 'cultural studies' turn, a progressive aura because it is used to refer to the post-industrial and post-capitalist context. In treatments of 'folk culture' in this perspective, Herder is invariably quoted, together with the Grimm brothers and other collectors of folk songs and tales, as exalting the values of nationalism and the Nation and as sharing the stigma attributed to the romantics, that of dreaming 'of a return to the simple virtues of nature as a means to combat and overcome the artificiality and savagery of urban and industrial life' (Storey 2003, 9).

In an article in which he surveys the relationships between history and folklore, Peter Burke distinguishes three phases in their development: the first, which he defines as 'the age of harmony', approximately from the mid-nineteenth century until the 1920s; the second, defined as 'the age of suspicion', stretching until the 1970s; and the third, the one we are living in, defined as 'the age of rapprochement'. About the present age, he records, starting around the 1970s, the emergence of a new awareness of social historians 'linked to the rediscovery of popular culture and the rise of "history from below" ' (2004, 136); and argues that

The rise of social history in the 1960s prepared the way for collaboration, especially when it took the form of 'microhistory' or the history of everyday life, or 'historical anthropology'. The 'cultural turn' on the part of historians has also facilitated the rapprochement, especially the increasing interest in the history of material culture as part of the history of everyday life. (137)

However, if this is true when we consider the work of historians like Burke himself, or Jacques Le Goff, or Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie and others which are mentioned in Burke's article as artificers of the rapprochement, when reading certain statements of historians working in the field of cultural studies one has the impression that research on the (popular) cultures of the past, i.e. on those cultures which were not yet touched by the impact of industrialization and urbanization, is judged as nostalgia for a 'world we have lost'. In other words, that a new form of 'suspicion', which started about the 1980s and is still active today, tends to infect the field of cultural history from within.

Storey's idea about (all?) the collectors of folk culture is that they 'idealized the past in order to condemn the present' (2003, 10). However, reading treatments of the issue of popular culture by scholars working in the field of cultural studies (the so called 'cultural studies approach' to popular culture), one has the impression that these scholars almost invariably tend to idealize the present (i.e., the industrialization and urbanization era) in order to condemn the past.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, as Barry Reay has remarked, 'A curious thing has happened – is happening – in modern studies of popular culture: the elision of the past', that is, 'the relative neglect – in case studies, cited authorities, discussed methodologies, and theoretical genuflections – of histories and historians of the period before the late nineteenth century' (1998, 221). Reay goes on to say that 'representations of the early modern cultures that we have lost are light years away from the consumer cultures of late-twentieth-century popular culture, the images (visual and aural) of advertising, film, TV, clothing, record, photograph, computer and material possession'. His treatment of this aspect is unfortunately limited to the last three pages of his book, where he suggests that 'Those interested in popular cultures today can surely benefit from an awareness that the complex cultural interactions of the past ... might have explanatory value for the present'; and concludes by suggesting that 'Practitioners of cultural studies should remedy history's absent presence' (222-223).<sup>5</sup> The brief treatment which Reay devotes to the deep divide between the study of the popular culture of the old times (whatever times) and that of modern and late modern times, then, suggests and encourages better communication and interaction between studies which he sees as belonging to the same area of interest and, perhaps, to the same discipline. But is this really arguable? Should the difference (which is a difference in the objects of study, in their diverse contexts and in the kind of 'texts' which have transmitted them) be deleted or even smoothed over by assuming that 'a perspective on the history of culture longer than that of the modern world might have some relevance to interpretations of modernity and post-modernity' (223)? To this cluster of issues I will return later.

In the pages that follow, I will discuss certain questions which the literary historian must face when dealing with the analysis of texts and their relationship with 'popular culture'; questions which inevitably receive a partial answer if the literary historian fails to encounter the point of view of the social historian. In order to grasp something of this point of view, I will therefore attempt to venture into the field of social history temporarily setting aside the tools of my trade. But, although I will not deal with any literary considerations on Shakespeare's work and its relationship with popular culture, I have a general point of view to express on this issue: the conviction that even in a work as elitist as the plays of the most celebrated poet and playwright ever, elements may be found which connect it to a world of values and symbols of the 'popular' components of its contemporary society.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, by stating the possibility of a connection between the work of a celebrated poet and playwright and the values and symbols of the 'popular culture' of his age (later on in this article I will, on occasion, get rid of the inverted commas), I am implying that the confines between differently oriented and differently engendered kinds and manifestations of culture are, to say the least, very thin; and that more often than not they tend to disappear. In other words, I am convinced that 'any discussion of Shakespeare's relationship with popular culture must necessarily recognize that outside as well as within

his plays themselves, the popular interacts with the elite in terms of audience, genre, and value systems or beliefs'; and indeed that 'there is throughout Shakespeare's work an interweaving of high and low cultural forms which ultimately defines the nature of his drama and of his distinctive achievement as a writer' (Gillespie and Rhodes, 2006, 11).

### 3. *Created By the People/Created For the People*

In 1992 *The American Historical Review* published an issue devoted to popular culture. The volume was introduced by a long article by L.W. Levine, to which other scholars were invited to respond.<sup>7</sup> The discussion was closed by another article by Levine who briefly responded to the others' comments.

Levine's article, which opens the forum, was entitled 'The Folklore of Industrial Society: Popular Culture and Its Audiences'. This title illustrates the author's intention 'to explore the degree to which popular culture functions in ways similar to folk culture and acts as a form of folklore for people living in urban industrial societies, and can thus be used to reconstruct people's attitudes, values, and reactions' (1992, 1372). This article, however, represents a determined shift away from a consideration of folklore values as produced by the folk. Popular culture, in Levine's definition, is 'culture that is *popular*; culture that is widely accessible and widely accessed; widely disseminated, and widely viewed or heard or read'. With reference to the years of the Great Depression in America, this definition, Levine acknowledges, applies also to 'what we call mass culture since it was disseminated throughout the nation by such centralized mechanisms as national magazines, syndicated newspaper features, Hollywood studios, network radio, Tin Pan Alley, and commercial publishing houses'.<sup>8</sup> Starting from the assertion that in those years 'not everything mass produced for the American people was popular', Levine argues against those critics and scholars whose 'aesthetic hubris ... has allowed the automatic equation of mass culture with popular culture as if everything mass produced was popular' (1373). His main contention, then, is that the receivers of mass culture (those people *for whom* certain mass-produced cultural objects were created and commercialized) in the period and in the context examined could discriminate and distinguish, that they could accept but also reject these products, thereby in certain ways influencing the cultural market by asserting the format of their own culture. The first and most important of the contentions around which the essay is organized is the rejection of 'the image of the purely passive mass audience ready to absorb, consciously and unconsciously, whatever ideological message those controlling the mass culture industry want to feed them' (1374). People, in short, 'did not passively accept whatever popular culture was thrown in their way', for 'they preselected the culture they exposed themselves to by learning to decipher reviews and coming attractions, by understanding the propensities of authors, actors, and directors

to whose work they had been exposed in the past, and by consulting members of their communities' (1380). In short, the status of mass-culture receivers must be converted from that of passive consumers to that of active users.

I agree with some of the objections which were advanced by other participants in the forum. In particular, I share Robin Kelly's remark that the main actors in the chain of actions which ends with the consumption of products, namely, the producers (and their intent) are almost completely absent from Levine's treatment; Kelly accepts the idea that 'the folk' in the industrial society were not a passive audience ready to accept whatever products were thrown in their way; but he also, rightly I believe, argues that 'a cultural studies approach ... would explore the ways in which audiences, through their own agency, both challenge and reproduce the dominant ideology' and that we must 'acknowledge that the "people" were largely relegated to the receiving end, and, in that capacity, they made choices under circumstances not of their own choosing' (1992, 1408).

Natalie Zemon Davis, in turn, although agreeing with Levine's vision of consumers as 'active users', directs attention to the users of past centuries at the same time arguing for a consideration of margins, the 'blurring of boundaries between cultural typologies' and therefore to the mixed cultural models and their cultural interaction; certain innovations in forms and motifs, Davis argues, 'may have come from local invention but also from manuscripts or peddlers' books read aloud by the parish priest' (1992, 1410); and this kind of mixture can be predicated both for the peasants of early modern Europe and for the workers of modern times. In short, 'the "people" may be among the makers in some fashion, as well as among the consumers' (1413). Furthermore, without explicitly criticizing the absence, in Levine's article, of relevant previous studies, some of which were the first to plead for a role of modern audiences as 'active receivers', when she first mentions the 'historians of late medieval and early modern Europe' (1409), Davis aptly adds a long footnote where the prominent figures in this field of study, herself included (together with Robert Mandrou, Robert Muchembled, Carlo Ginzburg, Michel de Certeau, Roger Chartier and others), are mentioned. In particular, Certeau and, after him, Chartier, were the first to systematically direct attention to the *usage* which consumers make of the cultural products they are exposed to – that is, to the 'poetics' expressed by the ways in which the products imposed by the economic system are appropriated and used by their audiences.<sup>9</sup>

It was Michel de Certeau who systematically and extensively drew attention to users and the tactics and practices by which they appropriate the products imposed on them by the economic system. The purpose of his book *L'invention du quotidien*, published in 1980 and, in particular, of the first volume, entitled *Arts de faire*, is

to make explicit the systems of operational combination (*les combinaisons d'opération*) which also compose a 'culture', and to bring to light the models of action characteristic of users

whose status as the dominated element in society (a status that does not mean that they are either passive or docile) is concealed by the euphemistic term 'consumers'. (1984, xi-xii)<sup>10</sup>

The consumers' action is a 'poiēsis', a *bricolage*, a 'making', which represents the user's active intervention on the products imposed by the economic system. A telling example of 'poiēsis' given by Certeau in the introduction of his book is:

For instance, the ambiguity that subverted from within the Spanish colonizers' 'success' in imposing their own culture on the indigenous Indians is well known. Submissive, and even consenting to their subjection, the Indians nevertheless often *made of* the rituals, representations, and laws imposed on them something quite different from what their conquerors had in mind; they subverted them not by rejecting or altering them, but by using them with respect to ends and references foreign to the system they had no choice but to accept ... their use of the dominant social order deflected its power, which they lacked the means to challenge. (xiii)<sup>11</sup>

Central to Certeau's argument are the notions of 'strategy' and 'tactic'. Unduly simplifying the author's fascinating treatment of these concepts, one may say that strategies are those which are deployed by a subject of will and power which occupies a place in a system of social, economic and political relationships: in other words, a strategy is that produced by a dominating rationality. A tactic, on the contrary, is that which is practised without relying on a proper place, but on a space which is controlled by the other. 'Many everyday practices (talking, reading, moving about, shopping, cooking, etc.) are tactical in character. And so are, more generally, many "ways of operating": victories of the "weak" over the "strong" ... maneuvers, polymorphic simulations, joyful discoveries, poetic as well as warlike'. Such 'clever tricks' are what the Greeks called *mētis*, and are similar to 'the intelligence displayed in the tricks and imitations of plants and fishes. From the depths of the ocean to the streets of modern megalopolies there is a continuity and permanence in these tactics' (xix-xx).

This is obviously not the place to deal in detail with the book's engaging treatment of these issues;<sup>12</sup> however, one point of Certeau's analysis is relevant to my concerns here.

Contrasting what he calls 'the enigma of the consumer-sphinx', that is, the idea that consumers simply absorb passively whatever is distributed to them by the strategies of presiding institutions, Certeau again quotes the example of the tactics devised by the indigenous to divert Spanish colonization 'from its intended aims' (31) and also invokes as a relevant model that of language and the Saussurian distinction between *langue* and *parole*. The linguistic model, he says, offers 'on the one hand, a stock of materials, on the other, transactions and users'. Similarly, 'in the case of consumption, one could almost say that production furnishes the capital and that users, like renters, acquire the right to operate on and with this fund without owning it'. The same kind of *appropriation* which is made with the use of language (by fashioning in certain ways the act

of enunciation and its product, as argued by Benveniste), according to Certeau, consumers perform in all the non-linguistic practices of everyday life (32-33). From one point of view, that of an observer of the uncontrollable invasiveness and aggressiveness of late modern strategies, Certeau's defence of the active usage and *bricolage* performed by consumers, his faith in the 'clever tricks of the "weak" within the order established by the "strong" ' (40), may appear utopian; on the other hand, however, his model may also appear reductive and ungenerous. It is true that consumption is refigured by Certeau as a form of production, but it can only figure as an ancillary form of production because it cannot but await the initiative of the 'strong' to start appropriating it. Furthermore, even a form of production as that envisaged by Certeau is reductive if applied to situations (in the past?) in which 'the people' presumably did more than react or creatively appropriate in a particular way what was given them. In other words, as Davis says, 'the "people" may be among the makers in some fashion, as well as among the consumers' (1992, 1413). This particular point of the theory poses an often repeated question in studies of popular culture: are we talking about culture created *for* the people or *by* the people?

Roger Chartier is clear on this point: the alternative created *for*/created *by* is for him a false problem. Following in the wake of Certeau's ideas, he says that

To ask whether 'popular' is merely what the people create or what is designed for them is to mistake the character of the problem we face. Cultural consumption, whether popular or not, is at the same time a form of production, which creates ways of using that cannot be limited to the intentions of those who produce. (1984, 234)

In other words, all cultural practices, not only those performed by 'the people', manifest themselves as creative appropriation; and indeed, Chartier questions the possibility 'to describe such-and-such cultural form as "popular" ' and the practice of identifying 'popular culture by describing a certain number of corpora (sets of texts, gestures, and beliefs)' (229).<sup>13</sup>

In a more recent essay, Chartier briefly discusses the attitudes which have characterised the study of popular culture in the perspective of the so-called 'new cultural history' and in particular the debate about the relationship between popular and elite culture. He sees two models which have characterised this study: on the one hand 'la culture populaire est pensée comme autonome, indépendante, fermée sur elle-même'; on the other, 'elle est entièrement définie par sa distance vis-à-vis de la légitimité culturelle'. In the development of this argument, we encounter another statement connected with the alternative created *for*/created *by*; that is, a challenge of what Chartier sees, in both the perspectives illustrated above, as a mistaken opposition 'entre l'âge d'or d'une culture populaire libre et vigoureuse et les temps des censures et des contraintes qui la condamnent et la démantèlent'. He finds this tendency expressed in a similar manner by historians of the Middle Ages who see in the thirteenth century 'une

acculturation chrétienne destructrice des traditions de la culture populaire laïque' of the preceding centuries and by twentieth-century historians who attribute to the advent of mass culture imposed by the new media the same dismantlement of the old oral culture. 'Le véritable problème', Chartier concludes, 'n'est donc pas de dater la disparition irrémédiable d'une culture dominée, par exemple en 1600 ou 1650, mais de comprendre comment, à chaque époque, se nouent les rapports complexes entre des formes imposées, plus ou moins contraignantes, et des idées sauvegardées, plus ou moins altérées' (2003, 7).<sup>14</sup>

In the passages quoted above, Chartier challenges certain points of view which, for many social historians, have constituted, and probably still constitute for some, firm guidelines for a diachronic reading of cultural forms and their development. In particular, he challenges the idea that certain great fractures in the European socio-cultural landscape (the obvious ones are the Reformation and Counter-Reformation and the advent of industrialization) determined a contraction of the people's cultural spaces and therefore of the cultural initiative which came from below; and that, consequently, the same fractures and cultural mutations impinged on the vitality and also nonconformity of the people's cultural undertaking. Abandoning these consolidated paradigms, and consequently the idea that a 'golden age' of popular creativity ended up by being constrained by these events and fractures, he seems to embrace the idea that, in all times and contexts, the role of the people was that of (active) consumers. But, however suggestive and subtly argued his hypothesis may be, the equally convincing narrative of other social historians, which differs from the Certeau-Chartier line of thought, cannot be ignored.

Peter Burke illustrates the process of withdrawal of the elite from the culture of the people and the growing chasm between the two cultures during the period from 1500 to 1800 and for which, at two different moments, two forces were mainly responsible: the clergy and the Reformers – both in the Protestant and in Catholic contexts – and the social and economic changes determined by the commercialization and industrialization of society. Introducing his treatment of the ways in which the progressive division of the two cultures was brought about, he says:

In 1500 ... popular culture was everyone's culture; a second culture for the educated, and the only culture for everyone else. By 1800, however, in most parts of Europe, the clergy, the nobility, the merchants, the professional men – and their wives – had abandoned popular culture to the lower classes, from whom they were now separated, as never before, by profound differences in world view. (1994, 270)<sup>15</sup>

Burke also devotes a chapter of his book (chapter 8) to what he calls 'the reform of popular culture', that is, 'the systematic attempt by some of the educated ... to change the attitudes and values of the rest of the population' (207) and the attacks to those attitudes and values carried on by the reformers, in the 'attempt to suppress, or at least purify, many items of traditional popular

culture' (208). It is therefore true to say that these epochal changes, apart from determining this progressive withdrawal and division, also represented an attack on the vitality of popular culture. As a paradigmatic figure of the growing distance between the people and the elite and of the contraction of the people's cultural spaces, Burke evokes the transformation and correlative loss of function which can be observed in one of the main cultural mediators in the Middle Ages and in early modern culture: 'The old-style parish priest who wore a mask and danced in church at festivals and made jokes in the pulpit was replaced by a new-style priest who was better-educated, higher in social status, and considerably more remote from his flock' (271).

Piero Camporesi, in turn, discusses the ways in which, in the Catholic context, the Counter-Reformation deleted the folkloric elements from church rituals. In the context of reformed ritualism he sees 'the end of all the cultural elements which had been self-managed from below' and at the same time 'the birth of the monstrous formula of mass culture'. 'The victory of Lent and the final defeat of Carnival', he argues, 'the triumph of capitalist ethics and of a new relationship with money, the inevitable surfacing of new ideologies and of a different work organization modified and narrowed the cultural and existential space of the people' (1991, 54). His idea is that 'the Counter-reformation tightening contributed to dig an ever deeper furrow between the little and the great tradition which quickly recoiled from the forms of folklore culture, by then heavily branded by the negative and demonizing mark engraved on its "superstitious habits", its "vain beliefs", its "diabolical remedies"' (88). It is interesting to note that, when discussing the same process of estrangement between the 'two cultures' and the correlative loss of liberty and vitality on the part of the culture from below illustrated by Burke, Camporesi evokes the same paradigmatic figure evoked by Burke in the passage quoted above: the parish priest who had represented the driving force for popular culture, he says, lost his function. For centuries this figure had represented

the co-existence of old and new; paganism and Christianity, the profane and the sacred, the oral and the written, the alternative of life and death, rebirth and return were embodied in the same full-blooded person in charge of the great rites of passage of the community (birth, marriage, death) ... Nearly all the names of these cultural mediators, indefatigable promoters of 'low' dramaturgy, have been deleted by the joint action of centuries, of the irreversible social mutations, of the voluntary omission of the High Church. (88-89; my translation here and above)

Bakhtin is fully conscious of the genuinely popular source of certain forms of 'low dramaturgy', of the difference implied in the alternative created *by/created for* and, consequently, of the fact that in some social practices an active role can be attributed only to the senders when, discussing the creative nature of carnival and the involvement of all those who take part in it, excludes from this experience precisely the role of 'receiver' or 'spectator' as being a non-role:

... carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators. Footlights would destroy a carnival, as the absence of footlights would destroy a theatrical performance. Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. (1984, 7)<sup>16</sup>

Equally conscious of the relevance of the alternative created *by/created for* was Antonio Gramsci who, in his reflections on popular songs quotes a classification suggested by Ermolao Rubieri between those composed by the people and for the people, those composed for the people but not by the people and 'those composed neither by the people nor for the people but adopted by the people because they were in harmony with their way of thinking and feeling'. He comments on Rubieri's classification saying that 'all popular songs can and must be reduced to the third category, because what characterizes them, within the framework of a nation and its culture, is neither the artistic dimension nor the historical origin, but the way in which this culture conceives the world and life, in opposition to official society'. Gramsci seems to militate on the side of the popular 'adoption' of forms formulated elsewhere (by the hegemonic culture) and to envisage an adoption (or appropriation) performed on the basis of the people's 'way of conceiving the world and life, in opposition to official society'. In other words, he seems to attribute to users both the previous possession of a cultural heritage of values and world views of their own and an oppositional intent. Then, from these observations, he passes on to more general reflections: 'in this and only in this', he says, 'the "collective" character of popular songs and of the people itself is to be found. From this, other criteria for research on folklore derive: that the people are not a homogeneous cultural collectivity, but consist of numerous cultural layers, variously combined, which cannot always be identified with particular historical groups' (1975, I, 679-680; my translation here and above).

#### 4. *Differences: Sources, Transmission, Texts*

The last issue I wish to discuss is that of 'difference' and the various senses in which this idea seems to me to be relevant to any discourse about popular culture. The basic consideration, that has long since become part of undisputed shared knowledge, is that we should consider, even within the same temporal and geographical context, the various configurations of phenomena at a micro-level and speak of 'cultures' rather than 'culture'. Tim Harris (1995) has discussed at length the necessity to 'unpack' the notion of popular culture precisely in view of an acknowledgement of the many ways in which it is manifested according to the subjects who express it and the conditions in which it is expressed. However, while the acknowledgement of diversity in time and contexts is universally affirmed in theory and practised in case studies, it seems to me that its general methodological implications for the analyst deserve further reflection.

Once we accept the idea of micro-level variety within a certain context, we encounter the issue of macro-level differences between different contexts. As argued by Barry Reay in a passage quoted above, 'the representations of the early modern culture that we have lost are light years away from the consumer cultures of late-twentieth-century popular culture' (1998, 223). It is indeed obvious to say that, when reflecting on issues of early modern culture, we are engaged with phenomena of a completely different nature, with a world organized on the basis of a completely different economic and social structure, with different sets of values, aspirations and interests, with a different diffusion and concentration of literacy, with different power relations and power structures than those we encounter when dealing with post-industrial contexts.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, this difference is arguable not simply because in one case we are engaged with issues which are temporally removed from us and that therefore we are not in the ideal situation illustrated by Stuart Hall, that is, 'in a period which poses the same kind of interpretive problems as our own' (1981, 231); and not simply because, in the latter case, the risk of anachronism is much reduced. Indeed, the difference in contexts, problems and representations also concerns the kind of 'texts' we can rely on as 'sources', the different *genres* to which the sparse documents the archives and libraries have handed down to us belong and also the different ways of diffusion and transmission of forms and models; and those differences imply the adoption of distinct paradigms of analysis and ways of reading. Trying to imagine, explain and provide evidence about what, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, led groups of women, throughout Europe, to 'confess' witchcraft and doing it by reading the 'evidence' provided by apparently tendentious court records is not the same as studying the strategy and rhetoric of confession of some of the accused in the extensively recorded proceedings of the Nuremberg Trials. 'Different problems', Burke says, 'require different methods of response'; and 'New sources ... require their own forms of source criticism' (2008, 117, 116). Translated into the language of literary criticism, different texts impose different methods of (close) reading.

One of the diversities which have been discussed concerns a problem of dating and continuity of phenomena and forms, which exists for the products of popular culture in the past and much less for the commercial products of the late modern age. Roman Jakobson and Petr Bogatyrev, commenting on what distinguishes the idea of 'birth' of a literary work from the same idea when a folklore 'work' is recorded, say that 'the work belongs to folklore only from the moment it is adopted by the community'. The analogy with the Saussurian concepts of *langue* and *parole* appears once more apt to explain the difference: 'Just as individual neologisms cannot be considered changes in the given language (*la langue*, in the Saussurian sense) until they have entered into general usage, and thereby have become socialized, likewise a folklore work is only that which has been sanctioned and adopted by a given community' (1971, 91). The same issue about the difficulty of dating the

birth of a popular motif whose presence is disclosed at a given moment in the past is discussed by Diane Purkiss who says that 'although it is possible to date the moment when a piece of folklore *surfaces*, in print or in a piece of oral storytelling that happens to have been recorded, this is obviously not the same as the date when it was composed or created'. Purkiss also remarks that

The situation is further complicated by the difficult interactions between oral culture and print in the early modern period. What survives as folklore is often (though not invariably) print, and as soon as oral folklore is print, it becomes not the oral folklore in which the illiterate early modern public was immersed, but something that exists alongside it, in indirect and tangential relation to it. (2006, 140-141)

Purkiss is here outlining the problem of possible (maybe inevitable) *distortions* in the transition from oral to print.<sup>18</sup> A more general problem of *mediation* is highlighted by many historians of early modern culture. It is indeed true to say that, generally speaking, early modern documents are much more deeply questionable as reliable sources than the commercial 'texts' (of whatever kind) which witness the cultures of the industrial era. Commenting on the reliability of the sources, manuscript and printed, used for one of his books, David Cressy says:

These are not necessarily reliable sources, and none is free of problems. Most are heavily weighted to the clerical, to the male, and to the literate élite. The immediate circumstances that produced them have often faded from view, and even the most generous sources leave much of the background opaque ... We know only those cases which came to court and for which documentary evidence has survived ... In the rare cases when personal testimony survives to amplify the allegation we are faced with problems of truth and diction, what had to be said to get the case into court, what had to be said to conform the story to the law, and the demands of judicial process. We may choose to call this surviving material 'evidence', in accord with established historical principles, so long as we recognize the mixture of reportage, prescription, book-keeping, special pleading, selectivity, and fiction that so often renders evidence intractable. (1997, 7)<sup>19</sup>

Other voices have expressed similar preoccupations about the reliability of early modern (popular) 'sources'. Tim Harris says that 'our access to the culture of the subordinate classes is ... normally indirect, mediated through sources produced by those who belonged to the learned culture of the elite. What becomes difficult', he adds, 'is to discern the extent to which the historical record of this popular culture has been contaminated by these elite mediators' (1995, 6). Commenting on the texts from which we get information about Elizabethan criminality, James Sharpe asks himself whether certain descriptions of the underworld 'tell us more about the fears of society, and ultimately of the government, than they do of reality'; 'Popular literature', he argues, 'constructed a stereotype of the criminal, and convinced the public at large of the dreadful consequences of sin for the individual and of the threat posed by the underworld to society at large' (1984, 165, 166). Piero Camporesi is concerned

with the sources (mainly the beggar books) which transmitted throughout Europe a misleading and deeply biased image of medieval and early modern beggars. Those sources, he says, are ‘fantastic, highly unreal, tendentious and classist’ and therefore they ‘cannot but transmit an altered, misleading and, in the final analysis, factious image of pauperism and mendicity’ (1973, clxxix; my translation).<sup>20</sup> Carlo Ginzburg expresses the same concern:

Since historians are unable to converse with the peasants of the sixteenth century (and, in any case, there is no guarantee that they would understand them), they must depend almost entirely on written sources (and possibly archeological evidence). These are doubly indirect for they are *written*, and written in general by individuals who were more or less openly attached to the dominant culture. This means that the thoughts, the beliefs, and the aspirations of the peasants and artisans of the past reach us (if and when they do) almost always through distorting viewpoints and intermediaries. At the very outset this is enough to discourage attempts at such research.

Ginzburg also establishes a difference which is relevant to his perspective, saying that ‘the terms of the problem are drastically altered when we propose to study, not “culture *produced by* the popular classes”, but rather “culture *imposed on* the popular classes”’. As an example of the risks implied in confusing the two perspectives, Ginzburg quotes Robert Mandrou who, he believes, when examining the so called ‘literature of *colportage*’ (booklets, almanacs, ballads, proverbs, etc.), equated ‘the culture produced by the popular classes’ with “the culture imposed on the masses”’; Mandrou, Ginzburg argues, failed to acknowledge that those booklets, almanacs, ballads, etc., were products *imposed on* the people; that, far from being ‘escapist’, they were ‘deliberately intended for the masses’. Consequently, he missed an important point, that is, that the *intention* of that imposition was to prevent ‘those whom it affected from becoming aware of their own social and political conditions’ (1980, xv).

Here we encounter again the alternative created *by/created for*; and, again, we meet the reflection of Chartier who, discussing the same kind of cheap literature, expresses doubts – although of a different kind – about Mandrou’s treatment of the issue. His criticism is twofold: on the one hand, he challenges the idea that the so-called literature of *colportage* and other cheap print (in France mainly the so-called *Bibliothèque bleue*) was, as argued by Mandrou, meant ‘essentially for popular usage’ for, he argues, the readership of the *Bibliothèque bleue* was ‘a public made up in the city of merchants and wealthy artisans and, in the countryside, of low-ranking officials and the richer farmers and laborers’ (1984, 231). On the other hand, Chartier also challenges the idea that spiritual models and reading matter, even though suggested or imposed from above, were accepted passively, i.e. without ‘adaptations, trespassing, and subversion’ (233). The leading idea is, again, that ‘What distinguishes cultural worlds is different kinds of use and different strategies of appropriation’ (235-236).

In spite of all subtle – and convincingly argued – assumptions about appropriation, usage and the active role which, on certain occasions and stimulated by certain objects, receivers may [have] take[n] up, I still believe that the difference posited by Ginzburg as well as the dual (popular/elite) model should not be abandoned. ‘Whatever the later modifications or clarifications’, Barry Reay says, ‘bipolarity fixes the conceptual boundaries’: the problem, with Chartier’s analysis, is that, unlike the bi-polar model,

The model of appropriation ... will go directly to the form – let us say, chapbooks or festivals – or to a particular example without assuming prior social categorisation. This mode of analysis may indeed find that a polarity (of some sort) applies, but it will be more attuned to multiple uses and less likely merely to confirm something that has already been decided ... The search for commonalty, in less subtle hands, could easily distort or erase important cultural cleavages. (1998, 201)

### 5. ... and Shakespeare

The most radical dismissal of official sources as reliable ‘evidence’ I have come across is that of Christopher Hill. Discussing the struggle for constitutional liberty in England from the point of view ‘of those who had no share in making laws, who were legislated against’, Hill says: ‘We get a lot of information from state papers, Parliamentary speeches and the correspondence of the gentry – the traditional sources for historians’. He adds, however, his evaluation of these sources: ‘I have a certain scepticism here. We have learnt from recent experience that most state papers are works of fiction; at best they make assumptions which it is difficult for us to recover now’. Then, very aptly for the argument of this article and of those which follow in this volume, he evaluates the possibility of resorting to other kinds of sources: ‘Might not ballads, plays and other popular literary forms neglected by real historians provide fresh insight?’ Hill soon puts the idea into practice by examining Richard Brome’s play *A Jovial Crew* (published in 1652, but first staged about ten years before), a text which he considers only ‘at first sight ... an escapist utopian fantasy’ (1996, 4).

The whole book is inspired, for its historical analyses, by literary and paraliterary texts (plays, ballads, sermons, political tracts, pamphlets, etc.); and uses them to construct an interpretation of the struggles of the meaner sort during the years of the seventeenth-century English revolution; the actors in this struggle are, in Hill’s text, a mixed bag of beggars, highway men, gypsies, religious dissenters, free thinkers, poor villagers, pirates, smugglers, poachers, etc. By deconstructing the title of his book, *Liberty Against the Law*, we encounter its main questions: ‘liberty for whom?’ and ‘the law made by whom?’ Hill tries to recover the people’s attitudes towards Parliament and the idea of liberty it

enforced (which, he argues, was liberty for the legislating class of landowners and wealthy merchants) and to construct, from below, the voice of those who were 'legislated against' and their idea of 'liberty' which, he maintains, was liberty *from* the law. In the texts which he uses in support of his argument, he tries to find these voices, evaluations, needs and aspirations. It would be easy to contend that even those texts which are constructed as representing the point of view of the people were not written by the people, and therefore did not represent the people's authentic voice. But those texts which profess to record, and provide evidence for, 'truth' are, in the opinion of many historians, also unreliable or even, as Hill says, fictional. The difference between fiction and document may, therefore, in the final analysis, be only quantitative; and, although to read history by resorting to works of fiction is certainly a risky practice, at least, when reading literature, we are equipped with a set of tried and tested procedures and know how to remove filters whose presence and nature are apparent. Thus, fortified by the historian's opinion, we finally find ourselves vis-à-vis Shakespeare and his texts' relationship with popular culture.

Hill quotes Shakespeare several times – on some occasions as a member of a popular class or as friend of some dissenter and on others discussing his texts' stance towards the lower classes which, he believes, was sympathetic; he evokes Shakespeare's representation of sylvan liberty (in the symbolic context of the forest of Arden, for instance) and some of his texts' adherence to themes of 'Robin Hoodism'; he also calls forth the mention of Gypsy proverbial phrases, or the idea of insubordination which we meet in *The Tempest*; and argues that 'In *Henry VI*, *King Lear* and *Coriolanus* Shakespeare captured the mood of the poor during the hungry years of 1590s and the following decade' and maintains that, in *King Lear*, Shakespeare shows he had 'an eye for social injustice, though for the benefit of the censor his most forceful passages are given to the mad Lear, speaking for society's outcasts' (256).

Although he deals with Shakespeare in a fragmentary way, Hill's position appears clearly to be in harmony with the idea of those professional Shakespeare critics who believe that Shakespeare's plays, to a certain extent, do allow the recovery of his opinions about 'the people' and his attitude towards them. The issue is one of the thorniest in the development of Shakespeare criticism: should we talk of Shakespeare or of 'Shakespeare'; and – if we choose to talk of Shakespeare – can we comment on *his* ideas or on what *his texts* suggest? And how does this alternative influence the issue of authorship? Furthermore, among those who believe that Shakespeare's ideas can, to a certain extent, be recovered or reconstructed starting from his works, the description of his stance presents diametrically opposed evaluations: from those who, like Coleridge, style him 'a philosophical aristocrat', a conservative and a hater of the people (differently called populace, mob, crowd, etc.) to those who, like Hill, are convinced of his concern for society's outcasts. And there is also a third possibility, that of opting for the opinion of another romantic poet, John Keats,

and embrace his idea of ‘negative capability’, that is, of absolute neutrality and aloofness. From time to time, confutations of one or all of these perspectives emerge, and the whole field of Shakespeare studies is revised and restructured according to some universally embraced (new) critical convention, or better, according to a new silent covenant. Today the universally accepted covenant is stipulated on the basis of the ideas of ‘afterlife’ and of media ‘appropriation’.<sup>21</sup>

Going against the grain of critical and theoretical subjection and conformism, I wish to reaffirm an old covenant, that of a kind of literary criticism which keeps an eye on history. With Hill’s book, we encounter the reciprocal gesture of a social historian who keeps an eye on literature in a ‘militant’ form: a thoughtful and unprejudiced gesture since, as Peter Burke says, ‘Cultural history is not a monopoly of historians. It is multidisciplinary as well as interdisciplinary; in other words, it starts from different places, different departments in the universities – as well as being practised outside academe’. Historians, then, should not recoil from reading – among other things – literary texts; for, Burke adds, ‘From literary critics, cultural historians can learn the “close reading” of texts’ (2008, 135). Texts, yes, and their ‘close reading’. This is how literary critics can give a hand to social historians. After all, one of the major and, I believe, more lasting conquests of twentieth-century literary theory is the idea that each text creates the competence of its reader by selecting, imposing and even inventing the methods and instruments for its analysis (Eco 1979).

<sup>1</sup> For an exhaustive survey of the development of cultural history and its different perspectives, see Burke 2008; a concise but useful survey is Arcangeli 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Wilson comments on the ambiguity of the term ‘popular’ in English, saying: ‘“popular”, in English is at the superficial level simply ambiguous. It means both “widely liked or followed” and also “to do with the people”. In French or Italian of course this particular confusion does not exist but it is introduced at once when the equivalent terms are translated’. He then adds: ‘The ambiguity in English, less acute in common than in academic parlance, conveys an opinion. What is “widely liked or followed” is almost certainly “to do with the people”. And by implication what is rare, unusual must appeal to the more discerning upper strata of society’ (1989, 517).

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of the Gramscian notion of hegemony, see Reay 1985, 18–21. E.P. Thompson builds his discussion of power relationships in eighteenth-century English society on the idea of hegemony (1974). Many texts discussing issues of popular culture allude to the idea of ‘hegemony’ or the dominant/subordinate dichotomy, although the passages quoted are usually taken out of their contexts – understandably, because, as is well known, Gramsci’s thought is dispersed in hundreds of fragments in his prison copybooks, and the topics must be retrieved by recourse to the whole work. It is surprising, however, that Gramsci’s reflections on folklore are usually not quoted by social historians discussing issues of popular culture. An exception is Wiseman 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Burke says that the field of cultural studies is a ‘loosely defined area’ (1994, xv).

<sup>5</sup> In the footnote appended to this sentence, Reay comments: ‘There are two related issues here: the elision of early modern history and the elision of history. The discipline of history was

central to what can be seen as early cultural study, but it was nineteenth- and twentieth-century history' (n. 94, 221). Stuart Gillespie and Neil Rhodes, introducing the book they edited on *Shakespeare and Elizabethan Popular Culture*, say that "The term "popular culture" is likely nowadays to suggest Hollywood and the TV soap, games shows and fast food outlets – commercialized leisure activities designed for mass consumption. These are indeed cultural products created for the people, but they are not of the people, which is an older meaning of the term "popular". Older forms of popular culture were for the most part not specifically commercial activities, and may be understood as the cultural expressions of the people themselves' (2006, 1). I wish to point out that *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Popular Culture* (Shaughnessy, ed., 2007b) published essays by various scholars almost exclusively devoted to Shakespeare's afterlife; in the words of the editor, to the 'reinvention, adaptation, citation, and appropriation of the plays ... across a wide range of media in subsequent periods and cultures' (1).

<sup>6</sup> That Shakespeare's plays (obviously much less his poems) are often called 'popular' in the sense that the audience which attended theatrical events was a mixed audience, that they were greatly enjoyed and represented an extremely lucrative box office business belongs to an entirely different set of considerations.

<sup>7</sup> Levine was the author of an innovative and influential book on Afro-American culture (*Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1978).

<sup>8</sup> Tin Pan Alley is the name given to a New York industry of music publishers active from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the beginning of the 1930s. I am not going to embark on a discussion of the distinct meanings which some historians give to 'popular culture' and 'mass culture'. I will only quote two definitions which show different ways in which the two concepts have been considered. The first one, quoted by Peter Burke, is by Dwight Macdonald. Burke argues that 'Literary critics and sociologists have tended to operate with two opposed models of popular culture, "Folk" And "Mass"' and quotes Macdonald's definition: 'Folk art grew from below. It was a spontaneous, autochthonous expression of the people, shaped by themselves ... to suit their own needs. Mass culture is imposed from above. It is fabricated by technicians hired by businessmen; its audiences are passive consumers' (Burke 1985, 32; the source from which the definition comes is *Against the American Grain*, New York, Random House, 1962). The second, formulated almost sixty years later, is by Michael Pickering: 'I regard popular culture', he says, 'as a valid term that is theoretically sustainable and worth working with as a keyword in media and cultural analysis. While I regard mass culture as an invalid term and not theoretically sustainable, we still need to think about it as a means for analytically distinguishing between different forms of popular culture' (2010, xxvii).

<sup>9</sup> David Hall remarks that 'Natalie Davis has been especially insistent that the people were not passive ciphers; even if the people learned from clergy and their like, the process of consumption was a process of revision' (1984, 11). The reference is to Davis 1974.

<sup>10</sup> Volume 2 of *L'invention du quotidien*, written with Luce Girard and Pierre Mayol and part of the same research project, is entitled *Habiter, cuisiner*.

<sup>11</sup> An unorthodox use of written materials is documented by Adam Fox in his study of literacy in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England. 'The Elizabethan preacher Nicholas Bownd', Fox says, 'observed the way in which the common people bought broadside ballads and set them up in their cottages and shops even if they themselves could not read' (2000, 9). The use which in this case was made of the ballads, which were probably on display on the mantelpiece, was either aesthetic, or maybe the written sheets were set up and shown to visitors as proof of literacy. The text quoted is Nicholas Bownd, *The Doctrine of the Sabbath Plainely Layde Forth*, London 1595, 242.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Burke said that he considers 'the analysis of the creative uses of objects ... the most important contribution to the popular culture debate in the last fifteen years' (1994, xxi).

<sup>13</sup> An often quoted corpus is that of the so-called *livrets bleus*, a term which designates the popular publications on various topics published in France between the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries. On these publications, see Burke 1981 and Chartier 1984. On chap-

books, which can be considered the English equivalent of the *livrets bleus*, see Newcomb 2009.

<sup>14</sup> There probably are different modalities of the disappearance of the active production of culture on the part of the people and of the advent of their more passive role; different processes which develop in the short *durée* and which are connected to a mixture of taste, habits, profit, convictions and other cultural factors. Peter Burke argues that with the professionalization of Elizabethan and Jacobean London theatrical entertainment 'the role of the audience was becoming more passive'; however, he also recalls that, starting in the first decades of the seventeenth century, a contrary process developed since an active and creative role of the people was affirmed inside the separatist congregations which expressed 'alternative forms of Christianity' (1985, 41-43; 43). On certain popular traits of seventeenth-century radical religious movements see also Capp 1989.

<sup>15</sup> As Tim Harris acknowledges, 'much of the specific scholarly work into various aspects of popular culture in early modern England seems to confirm Burke's picture'; in particular, 'the transforming effect of social and economic changes, such as the divisive impact of the spread of literacy, the commercialisation of society, the impact of the Scientific Revolution, and the rise of a culture of manners which caused the elite to withdraw from what they saw as the "uncouth" practices of the lower classes' (1995, 2, 1).

<sup>16</sup> To further illustrate the alternative 'culture *by* the people/culture *for* the people', we may recall Roman Jakobson's communication model (Jakobson 1960) which lists at its extremes a 'sender' and a 'receiver'; and, by unduly simplifying the issues involved, say that in post-industrial, commercial and urban contexts the people are fatally (and intentionally) relegated to the role of 'receiver', although of 'active receiver', as Certeau and Chartier have argued. But, in Jakobson's model, the poetic function (the function of *poiēsis*) is inconstitutive to the message formulated by the sender. The sender may assume the role of innovator, while the receiver is somebody (or some mechanism) designed for the sole reception, however active this may be.

<sup>17</sup> Commenting on the difficulty 'to separate not simply conceptions of popular and elite culture, but also to determine exactly which is which', Matthew Dimmock and Andrew Hadfield say: 'It is relatively easy to see such conflicts in contemporary culture, because we have some sense of where the boundaries lie even if we are aware of the problems of defining and policing them. Delving into the historical archive can often be more confusing' (2009, 2, 3). In the Introduction to his study of Rabelais, Bakhtin often comments on the misunderstandings and critical anachronisms generated by the fact that the whole culture of folk humour in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance has been described according to alien visions of laughter. He speaks of these anachronistic readings and the consequent 'modernization of laughter' (1984, 45) and says that by the romantics and by subsequent generations 'The element of laughter was accorded the least place of all in the vast literature devoted to myth, to folk lyrics, and to epics. Even more unfortunate was the fact that the peculiar nature of the people's laughter was completely distorted; entirely alien notions and concepts of humor, formed within the framework of bourgeois modern culture and aesthetics, were applied to this interpretation' (4).

<sup>18</sup> On the distortions produced by 'the inevitable mediation' in the transmission of originally oral discourses through written texts, see Lamb 2006, 11.

<sup>19</sup> In the essay published in this volume (47-62), Cressy reconsiders the problem of mediation both in general and in the specific light of recovering the 'voices' of early modern people in Shakespeare's works. The issue of the inevitable mediation – even when the people's voices are registered in courtrooms – is also present both in Pallotti's (211-239) and in Baratta's (185-208) articles in this volume. Discussing the social composition of litigants between 1560 and 1700 on the basis of existing evidence, James Sharpe says that 'Details of occupation as given in legal records can be unreliable'; but he adds that 'if we may discount a deliberate conspiracy by the clerical staff of courts to mislead modern historians, it would seem that both litigants and witnesses at courts were drawn mainly from the middling to lower ranks of society, from men and women of moderate or small property' (1985, 252). An extensive discussion of the

adequacy of sources we use in the study of early modern history in general is Scribner 1989.

<sup>20</sup> On the representations of mendicity in early modern European beggar books see Pugliatti 2003, especially Part Three.

<sup>21</sup> One of the books which authoritatively contested a critical *doxa* established starting in the 1980s, that of new historicism, deals precisely with Shakespeare and 'the people'. *Shakespeare and the Popular Voice* by Annabel Patterson (1989) boldly contested 'the avant-garde proscriptions against talking about authors and intentions' and returned to 'certain categories of thought that some have declared obsolete: above all the concept of authorship, which itself depends on our predicating a continuous, if not a consistent self, of self-determination and, in literary terms, of intention'. Patterson, then, argues the possibility 'of positing Shakespeare as a writer whose intentions, if never fully recoverable, are certainly worth debating' (4-5). The 1980s avant-garde prescriptions dictated by 'new historicism' included Greenblatt's subversion/containment paradigm of Gramscian derivation, which was a most consequential idea to any consideration of popular culture.

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