

**Chandra MUKERJI and Michael SCHUDSON (eds.), *Rethinking Popular Culture* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1991, 501 p. ISBN 0-520-06892-0)**

**Barry Edginton**

Volume 15, numéro 1, 1993

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1082556ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1082556ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

---

Éditeur(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (imprimé)

1708-0401 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

---

Citer ce compte rendu

Edginton, B. (1993). Compte rendu de [Chandra MUKERJI and Michael SCHUDSON (eds.), *Rethinking Popular Culture* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1991, 501 p. ISBN 0-520-06892-0)]. *Ethnologies*, 15(1), 164–166. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1082556ar>

The final section is Sexuality and Politics. "Platoon and the Failure of War" by Bat-Ami Bar On argues that *Platoon* valorises and edifies war, as well as presenting men and violence as generative. The article by Timothy W. Luke does not belong in this collection; "Xmas Ideology: Unwrapping the American Welfare State Under the Christmas Tree" focuses on the ideology of consumerism and the nuclear family, not sexuality. Douglas Kellner deals effectively with the contest between liberal and conservative sexual politics in the 1980's in "Sexual Politics in the 1980's *Terms of Endearment and Independence Day*".

This collection is interesting, clearly written, easy to read and free of jargon, as promised in the preface. I enjoyed most of the articles and I am impressed with the inclusion of work concerning lesbians and Black/African American women, as well as feminist analysis. I am, however, concerned that the majority of essays discuss a narrow range of sexual possibilities: i.e., female sexuality. Raymond states that "[our] bodies are capable of a range of sexual practices and sexual pleasures, none of which are 'natural' or 'essential'" (p. i). However, the limited number of articles focusing on male (hetero)sexuality and the omission of discussions of gay sexuality in this collection leaves a void in the an area that needs to be addressed when considering power and sexual politics. The editor hopes the differences among the essays will stimulate further discussion of the themes presented; I agree.

Fiona GREEN  
University of Winnipeg  
Winnipeg, Manitoba

---

Chandra MUKERJI and Michael SCHUDSON (eds.), *Rethinking Popular Culture* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1991, 501 p., ISBN 0-520-06892-0).

*Rethinking Popular Culture* is more than a collection of nineteen essays on the topic of popular culture; it is an attempt to articulate a new area of study and at the same time to rediscover its roots. These are its strength and weakness.

Mukerji and Schudson present to the field of cultural studies a well thought out and researched volume. The book is in two parts: a lengthy introduction by the editors, and articles organised under four headings — popular culture in history, anthropology, sociology and literature. Since *Rethinking Popular Culture* is to be used as a classroom text (I assume at an advanced level), the

introduction outlines the development of the field of popular culture studies. The discussion of each substantive area places the roots of contemporary cultural studies in the articles organised around the four traditional disciplines. "The readings collected here reflect the disciplinary origins of the new research in popular culture" (p. 53).

Throughout the introduction, the editors argue for a new discipline of study through the rediscovery of popular culture, a new object — a new discipline. To embrace this new discipline, the articles are organised not by affiliation or training of the author but by the object under investigation; e.g., Foucault is in the section on literature and Habermas in the section on sociology. Does this "rethinking" designate "a movement with its proper specificity, which characterises the initiation of discursive practices" (Foucault, p. 459), or "is it fortunate that modern theory demands that we are spared inquiring into the real intentions of the author[s]" (Boyne 1990, 136)? I think the former is the case in *Rethinking Popular Culture*.

Is, then, the discovery of a previously disregarded object of investigation reason enough for the development of a new field of inquiry? Are non-traditional, non-elite objects enough to form the basis of this new area or should there be a concentration on an approach that allows this new material to "speak" as a subject (Foucault, p. 462)? I assume the same forces are at work in the structuring of this new discipline as are in the more traditional disciplines. Who defines the boundaries in popular culture? Are the mentioned fields so hegemonic, as stated by the editors, not to allow for the development of different perspectives and objects of study within their traditions? It seems to me that those once on the outside of their disciplines are now major forces within them: Michel Foucault, Marshall Sahlins, Pierre Bourdieu, Roland Barthes, Clifford Geertz and Raymond Williams. I think we should understand the difference between a historical analysis of the study of popular culture that sees these works as barred from the academic sphere (as the editors do), and an analysis that sees these studies developing within the fissures of each discipline.

Also, I wonder if the argument for disciplinary accreditation is parochial. e.g., the discussion of professional researchers (p. 7) exemplifies the importance of territory establishment for cultural studies, but territory is relative. Speaking as a Canadian, is it better to read the "popular" history of the United States than to read the "elite" history of Canada? Speaking as a sociologist, I think the editors have a narrow, academic view of the ability of anthropologists and sociologists to accomplish historical research; most of the founders of sociology, who engaged in considerable historical and cross-cultural research, were not professional sociologists (e.g., Max Weber). Also, the statement that Marxist historians, a barred group I assume, "borrowed numerous sociological concepts" (p. 5) seems odd since Marxist theory (outside the United States) is an established part of sociology.

These questions are important if the reader is to have an understanding of this text since it is more than an exploration of the roots of contemporary cultural studies. It is a call for a new discursive practice, hopefully one that is not guided only by topic but also by method.

The articles are not a problem for this reviewer. All are "classics" and have been published before. All are interesting and a pleasure to read. All have popular culture as the object of their investigation. The question of including these specific examples as opposed to others is generally one of choice.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

BOYNE, Roy, *Foucault and Derrida: The Other Side of Reason*, Unwin Hyman, London, 1990.

GILMAN, Sander, *Disease and Representation: Images of Illness from Madness to AIDS*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1988.

*Barry EDGINTON*  
*The University of Winnipeg*  
*Winnipeg, Manitoba*

---

Marta WEIGLE, *Spiders & Spinsters: Women and Mythology* (Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 1982, 340 p., ISBN 0-8263-0644-6).

This is an invaluable sourcebook on the relationship of women and mythology in the classical and Judaeo-Christian traditions, and in the aboriginal traditions of the Americas. Its richness will surprise and enlighten even those who have happily immersed themselves in the recent outpouring of scholarly and popular works on goddesses, feminist analyses of fairy tales, narratives of historical or legendary heroines, and visions of matriarchal or gynanic cultures; those who are not acquainted with this material will find *Spiders & Spinsters* a good place to start.

The book's weakness is chiefly organizational. The unwary reader may become entangled in these linked webs of poems, myths, passages of scripture and scraps of commentary, theories of matriarchy, and anthropological accounts of ritual and other cultural practices. To add to the (initial) confusion, Weigle has illustrated her text or texts with pictures of cats' cradles, aboriginal artifacts,