

Ken Worpole finds young people do it for themselves

Total Culture



The struggle for self-respecting collective identities has, in postwar Britain, moved from work to leisure. Cloth caps, dungarees and steel-capped boots are now more likely to be found on the dance floor than on the early-morning bus. Automation, the rise of the service industries, the decline of UK manufacturing and agriculture (or its displacement elsewhere) have eroded identities based on the workplace, the craft or the skill. Five-year apprenticeships have been replaced by four weeks of YTS or various other ad-hoc training schemes. Even the marketing analysts have moved from occupational categories (academic, white-collar, blue-collar) to lifestyle analyses based partly on self-definition: 'new moralist', 'life's a party', 'young married suburbia' and a multitude of other fine gradations.

What are the public cultural policy implications of these far-reaching changes? If we can't take Lear to the factories any more, or Mozart to the mines, where does democratic cultural policy lead? These are serious issues. For liberal-democratic arts policy has conspicuously failed.

The audience for the theatre, for dance, gallery exhibitions, opera and the classical music

repertoire remains resiliently middle-class and higher-educated - and, even more worrying, in the 1980s has actually narrowed for the theatre and the cinema. Widening access to the arts has been rather more difficult than anticipated. But perhaps the original assumptions were profoundly wrong.

Paul Willis and his colleagues on the Gulbenkian enquiry into the cultural activities of young people, **Moving Culture** (*Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation*, £4.50), tackle these issues head on. And like punks invading an opera house, they have left behind some serious intellectual damage to conventional assumptions about contemporary cultural policy. **Common Culture** (*Paul Willis, Open University Press*, hbk £28.50, pbk £7.99) the more theoretical of the two reports, is a path-breaking attempt to move arguments about arts policy on to new ground, and difficult though the arguments are to assimilate, I believe it will exert a long-reaching influence over the next decade.

The key premise of the book is that although 95% of young people's lives are untouched by the forms and processes of public arts policy, all young people are to

varying degrees highly active in creating their own symbolic cultural worlds - out of the images, sounds, products, dreams and nightmares of commercial popular culture. The cloth of meaning may have to be woven out of a myriad scraps and off-cuts, but woven it is, day after day, year after year. And although there may be little skill required at work for many - Willis quotes a chilling survey which found that 87% of a sample of male manual workers in Peterborough exercised more skill in driving to work than in the work itself - enormous skills are developed and used, often collectively, in sound-mixing, hair-styling, tv watching, clothes design and many other processes of re-reading and re-creating popular culture. Trusting nobody in authority, young people do it for themselves.

It's a convincing case remorselessly argued: Willis is letting nobody off the hook for past failures to respond seriously to young people's evident creativity. But there are several reservations that have to be made. The first is a major absence in the catalogue of certain cultural forms, namely the popular press. When Raymond Williams began his long, pio-

neering study of the forms of popular culture, he started with the press as being the most paradigmatic. No doubt television has replaced it.

But however creative and re-productive young people are with many cultural forms, the case of the brutalism of the popular press surely needs particular consideration. For there is something about a corner newsagent on a Sunday morning - the xenophobia, the misogyny, the salaciousness, the virulent homophobia, the pornographic images and the endless political lies and distortions - that is *sui generis*. And it is not addressed here.

This leads to a second worry. For in endorsing the rapidity and ingenuity the marketplace has in developing popular cultural forms, there is a danger of intellectual self-liquidation. For if the 'market' is a self-evolving, self-regulating, continuously developing process of production and exchange, then where does the independent cultural producer (or artist) fit in? Archimedes knew it was possible to lift the earth with a lever - but he had to have somewhere else to stand to do it.

There have to be critical, aesthetic and political discourses independent of the marketplace that enable new ideas to develop. For it is precisely because the market is a perpetual motion machine, a sealed system, that it cannot itself create anything new.

The Smiths, Kathryn Tickell, Nigel Kennedy, Stephen Frears, Victoria Wood, Jeanette Winterson, Tony Cragg, Courtney Pine, may be best produced, published and distributed through the marketplace, but it is likely that they began their careers in the subsidised educational system, or in a self-defined avant-garde, or within a commercially marginalised sub-culture. Those seedbeds and self-sustaining networks still need public financial support.

But these are criticisms of detail rather than of overall principle. For the case that Willis argues is vigorous and compelling. The pace of

technological developments within the cultural sector is phenomenal and not likely to slow down. It is young people, Willis argues, who have shown the greatest sophistication in adapting to the new possibilities for a common culture.

While liberal arts administrators and commentators have defined the success and failure of cultural policy in terms of minor shifts in audience profiles for the traditional forms - a few 'C2s' spotted in the crush bar at

the Royal Opera House, extra record sales in Woolworth's for Pavarotti - in the cities of the plains the mushrooming satellite dishes, video rental shops, record fairs, pirate radio stations, high-street style wars and Acid House parties tell a different story. This is, as *Common Culture* graphically reminds us, the modern world. There is a lot of critical catching up to do; there is no reason why public cultural policy should always be a 100 years technologically out of date.