Cultural forms are composed of antagonistic and unstable elements. The meaning of a cultural form and its place or position in the cultural field is not inscribed inside its form. Nor is its position fixed once and forever... The meaning of a cultural symbol is given in part by the social field into which it is incorporated, the practices with which it articulates and is made to resonate.

Stuart Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing the Popular”

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognise it “the way it really was” (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to man singled out by history at a moment of danger. The danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers. The same threat hangs over both: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it. The Messiah comes not only as the redeemer, he comes as the subduer of Antichrist. Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious.

Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History”
My paper is situated at the point of conjunction of these two familiar quotations. I am concerned with the difficult and perhaps embarrassing question of value, which I seek to locate as a question, not about the intrinsic qualities of texts but about the uses made of them, including those uses that we ourselves make of them; and I attempt to clarify the relation between aesthetic values (as they are crystallised, for example, in canons and curricula) and social class.

This is not a historical paper, in the sense that I don’t try to explore the uses made of the Shakespearean corpus in the contemporary world. It is nevertheless historical to the extent that I try to argue, as a preliminary, that there has been a historically specific transformation in the organisation of cultural value in the postmodern period (to use a term about which I have grave reservations).

The paradigm of value with which we are all familiar, and that in a sense we all still take for granted, is one in which, as John Guillory puts it, the organisation of the literary field is homologous with the organisation of the field of the social: canonical texts, or canonical readings of texts, are aligned with the dominant social class, and non-canonical texts, or non-canonical readings of the canonical texts, are aligned with the values of oppressed or marginalised social groups; high and low culture are the correlates of high and low rank in the social order. 3

Put in this simplistic form, it’s not an entirely convincing model, above all because of its vision of the literary field as a plenum in which all voices are or can be represented; hence its failure to pay attention to the question of who has or doesn’t have access to this field, and of the institutional mechanisms by which access is restricted.

My argument, however, is not with the rightness or wrongness of this paradigm, but with its relevance. In brief, I argue that for a number of intersecting reasons, the model of a hierarchical organisation of cultural value and authority reflecting a hierarchical organisation of social power no longer holds good in the advanced capitalist countries, if indeed it ever did. The reasons are as follows:

(1) High culture is now fully absorbed within commodity production. The relation to the market can therefore not be used as a general principle of differentiation between high-cultural and low-cultural products, nor is it any longer possible to employ the traditional value-laden opposition between the disinterested, organic, original, self-governing work of art and the interested, mechanical, formulaic, and commercial mass-cultural text. Works of high culture are now produced in exactly the same serial forms as those of low culture: the paperback book, the record or disk, film,
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radio, and television (where there now exist specifically high-cultural channels). Within the overall cultural market high culture forms a “niche” market — but this is also true of many, increasingly differentiated, low cultural products.

(2) As high culture has come to occupy this more specialised position (one which is closely tied to the upper levels of the educational apparatus), and as at the same time the mass media have come to play an increasingly dominant role in the transmission of cultural values, the relations of cultural authority between the two spheres have significantly shifted. Whereas once, and especially in highly stratified social formations, high culture was unequivocally the culture of the ruling class, this hierarchical structure is no longer the organising principle of the cultural system. Rather, as Jim Collins argues, it has been replaced by a model in which those struggles between discourses destabilise the very category of “the dominant” by asserting multiple, competing hierarchies. In the former type the dominant and resistant can be differentiated with assurance because some kind of supra-discursive formation makes all discourses comparable within the same system. In the latter types of the heteroglot environment, individual forms of discourse construct their own hierarchies that fail to coalesce into one master hierarchy.⁴

The contemporary cultural system “does not have one centre, or no centre, but multiple, simultaneous centres.”⁵

(3) The categories of high and low culture (or their various synonyms), which are structured as a polar opposition, presuppose a more or less direct correlation between culture and class. But the relations of domination and subordination thus expressed have been modified in the twentieth century by the formation of mass audiences which are inclusive rather than exclusive. This seems to be particularly the case with the audience for television, which is structured by the tension between an attempt to construct relatively homogeneous groups of viewers across social classes (the “core” channels, prime-time viewing, “spectaculars” of various kinds) and a tendency to extreme differentiation (special interest or minority interest programmes, the range of channels in cable television or deregulated broadcast television). This “erosion of rigid social categorization”⁶ corresponds to the formation of a non-class specific “popular” grouping, but one which is not structured by its opposition to a “power bloc.” This thesis does not suppose that there is no difference between the consumption patterns of different classes, or that (for example) working-class people now have readier access to and interest in “high” culture; I
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do argue, however, that for consumers of "low" culture the sense of illegitimacy or of cultural inferiority that characterised previous regimes of value has now largely dissipated.

(4) Finally, the modernist fantasy of self-definition through opposition to a degraded mass culture has become obsolescent, and indeed has been replaced by rather different practices of fusion of or play between high and low genres and traditions. The principle that founds the modernist ethos, the critique of the cliché, has itself become vulnerable to the charge of arrogance, and has in any case been called into question by new modes of relation to seriality and repetition.

In the light of the discussion following Michael Bristol's paper, I should perhaps add a fifth reason here: the fact that we live in a culture which is fast becoming post-literate, and that, as a consequence, the modes of relation to the past — modes of memorisation and commemoration — made possible by print are being replaced by quite different forms of relation.

This is to say that there is no longer — if there ever was — a general economy of value which allows for judgements to be made on a single scale reaching across the spectrum of cultural texts. As soon as it is conceded that there no longer exists a general economy of value, however, a series of difficult consequences comes into play.

For the category of value does not disappear with the collapse of a general economy; it continues to organise every local domain of the aesthetic and every aspect of daily life, from the ritualised discussions of movies or books or TV programmes through which relations of sociability are maintained, to the fine discriminations of taste in clothing or food or idiom that are made by every social class and every status subculture, to the organisation of school and university curricula, museum and gallery exhibitions, and the allocation of commercial and public financing to the culture industries. There is no escape from the discourse of value, and no escape from the pressure and indeed the obligation to treat the world as though it were fully relational, fully interconnected. But what becomes entirely problematical is just the possibility of relation: that is, of critical movement across the spaces between incommensurate evaluative regimes. If the use of cultural objects is something more than a matter of individual preference (and the whole vocabulary of "preference" as it is elaborated by the rationalist individualism of neoclassical economics simply begs the question of why different choices are made and of whether some choices are better than others; "preference" has the great theoretical advantage of being ineffable), then it becomes a problem to account for the systemic
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formation of value without assuming criteria that hold good right across the cultural field.

The concept I want to propose as a way of clarifying this “deregulated” structure of cultural value is that of the regime of value. By this I mean a semiotic institution generating evaluative regularities under certain conditions of use, and in which particular empirical audiences or communities may be more or less fully imbricated. The anthropologist Arjun Appadurai uses the concept in this sense to define the cultural framework within which very variable investments are made in the circulation and exchange of commodities: the concept of a regime of value, he writes,

does not imply that every act of commodity exchange presupposes a complete cultural sharing of assumptions, but rather that the degree of value coherence may be highly variable from situation to situation, and from commodity to commodity. A regime of value, in this sense, is consistent with both very high and very low sharing of standards by the parties to a particular commodity exchange. Such regimes of value account for the constant transcendence of cultural boundaries by the flow of commodities, where culture is understood as a bounded and localised system of meanings.⁹

The concept is roughly similar to Tony Bennett’s concept of the reading formation, which is likewise used to bypass a sociological realism that would tie modes of reading directly to social groups. The reading formation is a semiotic institution; Bennett defines it as “a set of discursive and intertextual determinations that organise and animate the practice of reading, connecting texts and readers in specific relations to one another by constituting readers as reading subjects of particular types and texts as objects-to-be-read in particular ways.”¹⁰ What this means is that neither texts nor readers have an existence independent of these relations; that every act of reading, and hence every act of ascribing value, is specific to the particular regime which organises it. Texts and readers are not separable elements with fixed properties but “variable functions within a discursively ordered set of relations,”¹¹ and apparently identical texts and readers will function quite differently within different regimes.

Regimes of value are thus relatively autonomous of and have no directly expressive relation to social groups. In the case of “high” cultural regimes, this relative autonomy is an effect of historical survivals and of the relative autonomy of the modern educational apparatus, both of which then give rise to interpretative and evaluative traditions which do not directly reflect class interests; in the case of “popular” regimes, their
relative autonomy has less to do with the historical persistence of codes of value (although this is still a factor) than with the way the mass media work to form audiences that cross the borders of classes, ethnic groups, genders, and indeed nations. The concept of regime expresses one of the fundamental theses of work in Cultural Studies: that no object, no text, no cultural practice has an intrinsic or necessary meaning or value or function; and that meaning, value, and function are always the effect of specific social relations of signification.

Thus the regimes that make up the domain of “high” culture consist of sets of interlocking institutions framing particular kinds of practice and producing certain axiological regularities: school curricula; classroom trainings in appropriate responses and evaluations; the certification of academic expertise and the structure of professional careers in cultural production and cultural criticism; the institutions of the theatre, the concert hall, the museum, and the art gallery; the art market; the publishing industry (and the “quality” niches within it); specialist and non-specialist journals and magazines; criticism and reviews in the feuilleton sections of newspapers and of radio and television programming; peer-group cultures, and the conversational rituals that sustain evaluative codes; particular patterns of work and leisure, and particular codes of status-discrimination; and so on. As the shape and the relationality of this network, together with the protocols and criteria by which value is specifically articulated, vary historically, so too do the particular functions performed by “high” culture (one of these, but not the only one, may be to reinforce the discrepancy between aesthetic and economic discourses of value, as a way of designating aesthetic — that is, non-economic — value as a marker of status).

Like the regimes of high culture, although often in less self-assertive ways, the regimes of “popular” culture likewise tend to take on the task of reinforcing the disjunction between the two discourses of value — the task of converting commodities into non-economic values (aesthetic values, which may however take an ethical and experiential form). And they too are organised around complex apparatuses of codification, of formal or informal trainings, and of status marking. There may well be, of course, regimes of value whose central principle is the inappropriateness of “evaluation”; Eric Michaels makes this case for the Aboriginal art of the Western desert, which is based on a principle of reproduction and on inherited authorship rights, and similar arguments have been made for some forms of postmodernist art. The point, though, is that even such
an ethos of non-evaluation must be organised and regulated by a definite and historically particular regime.

An essay on graffiti by Susan Stewart neatly crystallises the different framings and consequences that arise when a cultural form is positioned by different evaluative regimes. As an “indigenous or folk form carried out by a community of writers relatively homogeneous in age” (165), the practice of graffiti-writing in New York and Philadelphia situates itself in one sense firmly outside “the aesthetic” and within a politics of the (re-)appropriation of space; in another sense, however, it is practised in accordance with quite specifically aesthetic codes. It possesses a comprehensive vocabulary of evaluation (an anti-language which often inverts the standard terms of approval, and which, giving special weight to the criteria of difficulty and frequency, values “elegance, speed, grace, and the sensuality of the body” [171]); and a distinctive technical vocabulary to describe its tools and its activities. A well-defined hierarchy of practitioners structures a semi-formal apprenticeship system:

beginners (called “toys”) work with master writers as apprentices. The toy generally progresses from writing simple “tags” (signatures made with markers or spray paints) on any surface to writing “throw-ups” (larger tags thrown onto inaccessible surfaces or the outsides of subway cars) to writing “pieces” (short for masterpieces: symbolic and/or figurative works such as landscapes, objects, letters, or characters drawn on a variety of surfaces). (165)

The dominant code is one of stylistic individuation, expressed in the triumphant formalisation of handwriting and repeated insistently across public space in such a way as to “serve purely as a mark of presence, the concrete evidence of an individual existence and the reclamation of the environment through the label of the personal” (165). The investment in frequency of production is borrowed from advertising and publicity, and the act of writing is “a tautological process of self-promotion miming the reflexive signifiers of advertising and ‘packaging’”; the borrowing should however be read, Stewart argues, as “a matter of adaptation, manipulation, and localisation” (166). For this aesthetics of the signature works both within and against commodity culture, figuring the writer at once as brand name and as the repetition of resistance to the repetitions of commodity culture.

Whereas, for the writers, graffiti works¹⁶ as an appropriation of privatised public space, a reduction of the public monumental to the scale
of the handwritten name, which "contrast[s] to the monument's abstraction and stasis the signature's personality, mobility, and vernacular, localized audience" (169), within a quite different regime of value, that which organises the readings of city officials, graffiti relates to public space as dirt and crime. A key term here is "defacement": as with the defacement of coinage, graffiti "is considered a threat to the entire system of meanings by which [public] surfaces acquire value, integrity, and significance" (168). Specifically, it is a threat to the system of property values, and a mark of the failure of state policing of the common domain.

It thus ties into a wider semiotic network in which it is read as an ethico-political, not as an aesthetic, practice. Explicitly placed outside the realm of the cultural, it is linked to "the dirty, the animal, the uncivilised, and the profane" (168). Its producers are (incorrectly) assumed all to be of Afro-American or Latin descent, and are characterised as deviant (members of criminal gangs, or insane). Despite the absence of a sexual thematics in graffiti, which focuses entirely on the representation of the proper name, it is organised within this regime as an obscene form: writing in the wrong place. And, in order that the vast resources expended on "graffiti maintenance" can be legitimated, it is characterised, despite its physical durability, as a reversible or erasable form: like dirt, and unlike the artwork, it contains within it the necessity of its own removal.

The conflict between these two axiological regimes is fought out at the level of the streets and the subways. A third regime, however, moves the scene of value off the streets and into the coffee-table books and the galleries. Stewart describes two wings, the "liberal" and the "avant-garde," of the aesthetic appropriation of graffiti (the difference between them is a matter of a family quarrel). The liberal solution to the "graffiti problem" involves one of two demands: either that writers paint over their work, or that they become art students, redeploying their talents in the traditional studio genres. Stewart calls these approaches "insidious": the "encouragement" of the writer's creativity is in effect a matter of disciplinary punishment, a punishment that takes as its thematic a generalised representation and simultaneous suppression of the signature which had been at the centre of the graffiti artist's work" (170). To "reform" the writers of graffiti — to channel their skills into the codes of a discrepant aesthetic formation through a process of retraining — is at once an aesthetic and a political project, one which involves a repression of the social conditions of necessity and possibility of graffiti writing and a determined attempt to keep up appearances.
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The avant-garde aesthetic, by contrast, seeks to retain the signature of the writer, but to retain it in the fetishised and saleable mode of "a self-conscious intentionality which places the artist intertextually within the tradition as it is defined by critics and the art establishment in general" (172). This tradition (that of "a progression of individual artifacts worked by individual masters" [172]) displaces the local and recent tradition of autograph graffiti into a place where it figures as "the spontaneous, the primitive, the real of this tradition — a real located in nature and the body. Here the invention of a tradition for graffiti, particularly as a form of "folk art," is the invention of both nostalgia and currency. Graffiti is valued as a dying art form, the romantic heir to abstract expressionism and pop art" (173). The movement to a regime of taste substitutes a new object — graffiti produced on canvas as an object of appreciation — for the mobile and difficult autograph on the subway car, or the logo rapidly inscribed on the side of a bank. Within this regime, "the valuation of graffiti is an effort to accommodate through adaptation a novel threat to the status of the art object in general. To the extent that graffiti writers move off the street and into the gallery, the threat will be met" (174).

A final regime of value — one which brackets the status of graffiti as art in order to refuse a "liberal pluralism of aesthetic judgements" (163) according to which each regime confronts the "same" object from different perspectives — is that from within which Stewart herself writes, and which makes it possible for her to play off the "street" regime against the others. The concept of regimes of value makes two things possible.

First, by specifying the mechanism by means of which "extratextual" determinations like social positionality are translated into reading practices (mechanisms of training in the recognition and use of distinct codes of value), it demonstrates the irreducibility of semiotic codes to class or race or age or gender — and, conversely, it stresses the point that, because of this very non-equivalence, class and race and age and gender are always to an important degree imagined (but not imaginary) structures. Second, it makes it possible to rethink the relation between canonical (or "high") and non-canonical (or "popular") culture, as practices of value rather than as collections of texts with a necessary coherence: the text of graffiti can figure as well within a "high"-cultural regime as within a "popular" regime; and the same is true — perhaps the other way round — for the corpus of Shakespearean texts. This is not to revert to a use of these categories as substantive or internally coherent categories; it is merely to accept the fact that the concepts of a "high" and a "popular" regime
continue to organise the cultural field and to produce ideological effects of cultural distinction. At the same time, this shift from texts to practices underlines the spuriousness of those defences of “the canon” which assume that texts have intrinsic worth.

Two brief conclusions follow from this. The first is that the Shakespearean texts have only uses, not inherent meanings and functions, and that they are therefore under many historical circumstances open to reappropriation by a range of social forces. It seems to me crucial that, in our dismay at the appropriation of these texts by the powers of empire and a class establishment which draws an anachronistic sense of distinction from association with a body of writing that it probably never reads or hears, we should not give up on texts that can be made to work otherwise — should not concede them to the enemy. The exemplary practice here is surely still Brecht’s Umfunktionierung: the reworking of past texts to serve present purposes (for example, Brecht’s rewriting of Coriolanus).

In saying this, I do not mean to prejudge the question of whether, in this particular conjuncture, the Shakespearean texts are indeed capable of being redeemed for better uses. In Marxism and Literary History I wrote, following an argument of H.R. Jauss’s:

The destruction of the aesthetic distance between [the “classic”] texts and the contemporary horizon of literary norms means the approximation of the classic to kitsch. The social function of the classical text is in the first place to be a classical text, to signify its own value as cultural capital. It is entirely a self-signal, a solid and empty frame, and it is therefore withdrawn from the realm of heterosignification. This can be restored only if we contest the function itself and displace the text from its ideal non-time, restoring a historical distance and strangeness to it. To put this differently, the text has not only an intertextual relationship to previous texts (in the case of the classics this is usually effaced) but also an intertextual relationship to itself as canonised text. The responsibility is ours for making this relation one of difference from itself, of self-estrangement, rather than of conformity with itself.¹⁵

The second conclusion has to do with our class position as intellectuals. The concept of regime of value makes it possible, it seems to me, to understand the practices of both high and popular culture as being connected not in any direct way to the ruling class or the working class or to something called “the people” but rather to particular cultural institutions, primarily the education system and the mass media. My particular concern here is with high culture, and with my judgement that it is now
the culture not of the dominant class but of an institutionally located intelligentsia. What does this mean in practical terms? Two things. First, that we should take the specificity of our own class location seriously, and abandon both our shame at being a “dominated fraction of the dominant class,” as Bourdieu puts it — we are not — and our aspiration to play the role of tribune of the people. We should stop claiming to speak for others, or fearing that we do so without being able to help it, and start listening hard to what we ourselves have been saying all the time. This is not to romanticise the middle-class intelligentsia as having necessarily progressive interests; it is to say that these interests are by definition ours, and that we must come to terms with those values that set us apart both from the ruling class and from that vague entity called “the people” before we can ever hope to clarify the relations that bind us to them.

Secondly, it means that we should recognise that we do have a vanguard role, a “leading” role in Gramsci’s precise sense of the word, not in the political but in the cultural sphere. It may be that we see the mass of “mundane” uses of literary texts, in journalism, in the secondary schools, in public debate, as being hopelessly removed from our own concerns; but in the long run it is we, the élite intellectuals in the universities, who for better or worse shape and articulate those uses (this is something of which — to pick up a point from Leigh Dale’s paper — academics such as Wilkes and Kramer and Riemer never lost sight). And this means that we have a deferred, mediated, but nevertheless very real power in framing, for example, the textually organised values that have to do with the affective force of the nation (and let me say in passing that I think there is often a real problem with the way a nationalist rhetoric may shape oppositional responses to Shakespeare), or with the politics of gender, or of militarism — in short, with that whole complex of values that we call a culture.

Dan Quayle is not wrong, I hope, to believe that an intellectual élite is engaged in a battle over values. And the Shakespearean texts continue to be one of the sites on which that battle is fought — not because of something inherently special about the texts, but only and precisely because they have been constituted as a site of struggle by being invested with immense symbolic importance. Part of what is-valuably involved in literary studies is the attempt to come to terms with the otherness of the past; but what is also inescapably involved in it is the history of the present, the attempt to redeem even the dead from that unceasingly victorious enemy.
Notes


4 Jim Collins, Uncommon Cultures: Popular Culture and Post-Modernism (New York, London: Routledge, 1989): 25. Cf. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, “Popular Culture,” New Formations. 2 (Summer 1987): 83: “The present situation is one in which it is possible to say that there is one culture (albeit with divisions in it) or several cultures (overlapping and rubbing up against each other) but no longer that there are two cultures, high and popular, divided from each other. If pressed, I would probably opt for the view that there is one (multiply divided) culture and that within this culture the dominant position is occupied by forms traditionally designated as popular.” Collins 27.

5 Morag Schiach, Discourse on Popular Culture: Class, Gender and History in Cultural Analysis, 1730 to the Present. (Cambridge: Polity, 1989): 171. Cf. Tim Rowse, “The Trouble with Hegemony: Popular Culture and Multiculturalism,” Politecs. (November 1985): 71, for an argument that the concept of “popular culture” cannot be analyzed as a coherent category in class terms, since “one of the possible meanings of ‘popular culture’ is that it constitutes audiences that cut across classes.”

6 Peter Sloterdijk tells the story of the process by which the bases of Enlightenment criticality come to be revealed as anything other than an impartial commitment to truth and dialogue; come to be revealed, that is, as interest and force. Peter Sloterdijk, Critique of Cynical Reason. Trans. Michael Eldred. Theory and History of Literature, Vol. 40. (Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1987): especially chapters 2 and 3.


10 Bennett 10.


12 Susan Stewart, “Ceci Tuer a Cela: Graffiti as Crime and Art,” Fekete 161-80; subsequent references are given in the text.

13 I have followed Stewart, and common usage, in treating “graffiti” as a singular collective noun.
