READINGS IN CULTURE

Semester: 2   Groups: 2   Pr. T. GHOURDOU

CULTURE

'Culture' is not easily defined, not least because it can have different meanings in different contexts. Edward Burnett Tylor, a famous 19th century English anthropologist, gave one of the first clear definitions of culture in the West. He defined culture as a complex collection of "knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society". It entails recognition that all human beings live in a world that is created by human beings, and in which they find meaning. A modern definition of culture is given by anthropologist William A. Haviland in Cultural Anthropology as follows: "Culture is a set of rules or standards that, when acted upon by the members of a society, produce behaviour that falls within a range of variance the members consider proper and acceptable."

The two most important or general elements of culture may be the ability of human beings to construct and to build, and the ability to use language (understood most broadly, to embrace all forms of sign system).Our self-awareness as cultural beings is grounded in this confrontation, and thus in the exercise of power (as we struggle to sustain our own values against an assault from others). Cultures endure even though the individuals who built them die. So, at the very least, our understanding of time is transformed, and our understanding of history created. Paradoxically, at the very moment in which we become aware of ourselves as cultural beings, we are both enabled (we can do new things and, in principle, do anything we like), but can no longer ever be certain what is the right thing to do, and so in doing anything, we fall into conflict with others. Thus, cultural studies is necessarily concerned with artificiality, and the political struggle to find and defend meaning.

CULTURE INDUSTRY

The term 'culture industry' was coined by the Frankfurt School theorists Horkheimer and Adorno in The Dialectic of Enlightenment (2002), to refer to the production of mass culture. This deliberately contradictory term (setting the culture against its apparent antithesis in industry) attempts to grasp something of the fate of culture in the highly instrumentally rational and bureaucratic society of late capitalism. The account of the culture industry may be seen, at root, as economic, and as such an integral part of the reinterpretation of dialectical materialism that is a central theme of The Dialectic of Enlightenment. The culture industry, embracing advertising as much as radioand cinema, serves to transform use value(the utility that consumers derive from a commodity) into something that is producedby the capitalist system. It may be suggested that the combination ofadvertising and the mass mediapromotes less particular products,and more a capitalist lifestyle.

This account of the absorption of use value into production goeshand in hand with Adorno's analysis of the fate of the relationshipbetween theforces of production and the relations of productionin twentieth-century capitalism. The independence of use valuein nineteenth-century capitalism gave the human subject genuineautonomy and thus potential for resistance (thereby destabilizing capitalism). This autonomy is now increasingly lost. Similarly,administrative techniques, that developed as part of the forces ofproduction (to increase the efficiency of industry), now become fundamental to the relations of production (so that market exchangeand property ownership are subordinated to bureaucratic organisation, and the employee and the unemployed alike become claimantsfor welfare payments). The contradiction between the forces andrelations of production, that for Marx would bring about the fall ofcapitalism, is removed in this totally administered society.

CYBERCULTURE

CYBERCULTURE is the cultural space ('cyberia' (Escobar 1994)) that has been createdthrough computer technology, and in particular computer-basedcommunications and thus the internet. Cyber-culture is thus the vastgathering of information, misinformation, sounds, images and ideasthat can be accessed through the internet, along with the set ofpractices, attitudes, values and ways of thinking that respond to and are a consequence of the 'cyberspace' that has been created throughthe global interconnection of computers. The interpretation andanalysis of cyberspace overlaps significantly with concerns over therelationship between humanity and other forms of technology, notleast that of mechanical and genetic enhancement of the human bodyin the form of the cyborg.

The internet, like most new technologies, has generated extremesof loving enthusiasm and profound fears. The clash between the twohas been, and continues to be, worked out in a series of moral,political and cultural debates. Early concerns over the appropriate useof the internet ('etiquette'), as a wider and at times commerciallymotivated public began to intrude into the previously academicallyrefined internet, continue, for example in concerns over (and the sheerirritation at) the abuse of email through spam. More profoundly, theinternet has generated moral panics over access to pornography and imagesof violence.

Precisely because cyberspace allows the user to reinvent or fictionalise their identity, it is also a space in which identities can becreatively explored (Turkle 1996, 2005). The question of who I amwhile in cyberspace is ever present. The user may be understood tofuse (in the style of a cyborg) with the very technology that facilitatesthe internet. Traditional notions of embodiment are challenged bythe experience of cyberspace. Cyber-feminism (following Haraway's(1991) analysis of the cyborg) has explored the way in which cyberspace opens up the possibility of deconstructingtraditional patriarchalbinary oppositions, such as those between male and female,and technology and nature (see Kennedy 1999; Plant 1997).

If cyberspace is transforming our understanding of ourselves asindividual and embodied beings, then the use of cyberspace and theinternet is also, in practice, transforming the ways in which weinteract with others.