

Mass Communication and Popular Culture

COMM2112 Theories of
Communication and Persuasion
Semester One 2008
Paul Emerson Teusner

Cultural Studies

- An important set of theories and practices in the humanities and social sciences
- Key foci
 - Societies characterized by power struggles
 - ‘Meaning’ is key to social power

Thesis 1

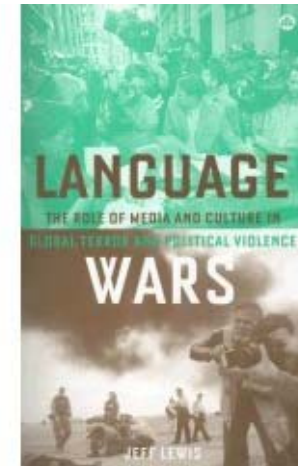
- Societies characterized by power struggles
 - “Social relations are understood in terms of social power, in terms of a structure of domination and subordination that is never static but is always the site of contestation and struggle. Social power is the power to get one’s class or group interest served by the social structure as a whole....” (John Fiske)
- Key concepts
 - Social relations = power relations
 - Structures of domination v subordination
 - Dynamic of contestation and struggle

Thesis 2

- Meaning as the site of contest
 - “In the domain of culture, this contestation takes the form of the struggle for meaning, in which the dominant classes attempt to ‘naturalize the meanings that serve their interest into the ‘common sense’ of society as a whole, whereas subordinate classes resist this process in various ways and to varying degrees and try to make meanings that serve their own interests.” (John Fiske)
- Key concepts
 - “Meaning” is an important source of power → the struggle of signification
 - Domination strategy: ‘naturalize’ preferred meanings into ‘universal’ ‘common-sense.’ (hegemony)
 - Resistance strategy: refuse, resist, subvert, transform these dominant meanings.

Example

Jeff Lewis, *Language wars: The role of media and culture in global terror and political violence.* (Pluto Press, 2005)



- 9/11 response?
 - Geoffrey Robertson (England)
 - 9/11 a criminal act → a legal/policing response: investigation, arrest, prosecution
 - George Bush (U.S.A.)
 - 9/11 an act of political terrorism → a “war” on terror
 - authorizes “state violence”: restriction on civil rights, invasion of other countries, detention without charge or prosecution

Cultural Studies and Media

- Key institution
 - The Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) 1964
- Key influences
 - European Structuralism
 - A concern with text, tools for the study of meaning and signification within texts
 - Neo-Marxism
 - Meaning-making is an ideological process
 - Signification is a major site of ideological contest for determination and resistance
- A key figure: The work of Stuart Hall 1980

Key areas of study

- Understanding, defining culture and popular culture
- Popular Culture
 - Study of meanings found in popular texts
 - Affirmation of aesthetic value of the popular
- Commodification and consumption practices
 - The links between material exchange and symbolic exchange
 - Cultural traditions transformed into commodities for commercial purposes
 - Pleasures of consumption and signification: shopping malls, soap operas, technology use.
- Sites of communication

Sites of communication

- The body
 - as site of power contest and exchange, commodity, site of meaning
 - modes of identity and representation
- Ethnicity, race and nation
 - Cultural construction of “nation,” nation as “imagined community.”
- Cultural spaces and time
 - Urban space, globalization
- Youth resistance and subcultures
 - Graffiti, bricoleurs,
- Celebrity and fan culture
- Media technologies

Principal methods of study

- Principal methods qualitative, not quantitative
 - Focus on interpreting meaning, not counting numbers
- Textual studies
 - Analysis of texts, audiences, cultural symbolism, influence of power
- Action-based research, ethnography
 - Explore the meanings constituted through everyday practices and human agency
- Policy
 - How cultural power works through public and bureaucratic and legislative processes

Understandings of culture

- Culture as refinement
 - German *kultur* = intellectual and spiritual refinement
 - Our idea of “civilisation”
- Culture as cultivation
 - Romanticism = culture as enlightening the mind and spirit
- Culture as way of life
 - Anthropology & sociology = everyday practices, esp of tribal, ethnic, national or social groups
 - E.g. Australian culture, Asian culture, Greek festival
- Culture as texts
 - All modes of cultural symbolic representation, i.e. meaning-making

Media and culture

- Media as “way of life”
 - The culture of different media
 - How different media require different social institutions, practices, etc.
 - How different media produce different cultural practice
- Media as “meaning-making”
 - Language and symbolism are key to culture
 - Physical reality develops meaning as it is interpreted / represented within the stock of symbolic language
 - All reality is mediated – media are the sites at which this meaning-making takes place

POPULAR CULTURE

Raymond Williams

Culture:

A particular way of life, whether of a people, a period or a group

Includes “culture” as aesthetic or intellectual activity (poetry, dance, art, writing) and culture as a process of aesthetic, intellectual and spiritual development, e.g. “great artists”

Definitions of Popular Culture:

1. Popular culture is well-liked or widely favoured
2. Popular culture is not HIGH CULTURE
3. Popular culture is MASS CULTURE
4. Popular culture emerges from the people
5. Popular culture is a site of struggle between dominant and subordinate groups in society
6. Postmodern culture is the collapse of high/low culture distinctions

1. Popular culture is well-liked or widely favoured

..but at what point (amount) does something become popular ?

2. Popular culture is not HIGH CULTURE

Culture and Civilization thesis

Matthew Arnold:

Culture is the “best that has been thought and said in the world”

F.R. Leavis:

Loss of pre-industrial folk culture; responsibility of the elite to keep alive the “best” of culture and to criticize the “worst” for its “addictions” and “distractions”

3. Popular culture is MASS CULTURE

Frankfurt School: Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer

High vs. Mass culture and the “Culture Industry”

- Mass culture is commercial (cinema, radio, popular fiction, pop music), is degraded, is homogenized, is standardized.
- Mass audiences are unthinking, passive, focused on instant gratification
- High culture is critical, not commercial, is original

4. Popular culture emerges from the people

Who are “the people”?

What about commercial influences on the resources from which this culture is made?

5. Popular culture is a site of struggle
between dominant and subordinate groups in
society

Incorporation *and* resistance

“Popular culture ... is an arena of consent and resistance. It is partly where hegemony arises, and where it is secured. It is not a sphere where socialism, a socialist culture - already fully formed – might be simply ‘expressed’. But it is one of the places where socialism might be constituted. That is why ‘popular culture’ matters.” (Stuart Hall in Storey, 1998 p. 453).

Hegemony (Antonio Gramsci):

Functions to generate the consent of the subordinate classes to the beliefs, ideas, and values of the dominant classes. It makes social power appear “natural” and legitimate. It is not stable but must be constantly won and reproduced

Other issues to consider beyond economic structures:
gender, ethnicity

Feminism and Popular Culture:

- Ien Ang
- Tania Modleski

Rejected Frankfurt School idea of mass (popular) culture as degraded, as escapism, and as manipulative to examine how popular texts such as Soap Operas communicated to the real problems/tensions/issues of the audience.

Drew attention to ideas of pleasure and active consumption. Re-evaluating what had been seen as “trivial” culture.

Ideology: Louis Althusser

A system of beliefs, values and ideas - e.g. the “common-sense” assumptions used to make sense of ourselves and where we are located in culture. It appears “natural” but is political and caught up in relations of power.

e.g. gender or national identity

Stuart Hall (“post-marx”): ideological struggle as ‘articulations’, ‘disarticulations and ‘rearticulations’ - e.g. meaning is the result of acts of expression created in social relations, not something that is inherent to the text.

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