

Anthropology of popular culture

Raymond Williams' understandings about popular culture

- 1) Generation development
- 2) Way of life
- 3) Intellectual artistic activity

John Storey's five types

- 1) Well liked by many people.... versus unpopular
- 2) as what is left over (versus high culture)
- 3) pop culture as mass culture, hopelessly commercial
- 4) pop culture as folk culture: of the people for the people)
- 5) pop culture as a site of struggle or area of negotiation: between the 'resistance' of subordinate groups and the forces of 'incorporation' operating in the interests of dominant groups-gramsci.

Folklore- Folklore and romantic nationalism vs. Alan Dundes- folklore as adaptive strategy for contemporary life

autobiographical ethnography

mission of culture

outlet for the forbidden

symbolism

Culturalism

the mobilization of cultural difference in the service of national or transnational politics- Arjun Appadurai

Tradition "a moving image of the past, opposed not to modernity but to alienation" Paul Rabinow.

We are interested less in the different kinds of tropes (metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, irony etc) and more in the role of figurative speech

What does a given trope do?

The role of figurative speech- of a trope-is to allow us to understand something we don't know or haven't experienced by way of what we know, often intimately.

"the enchanted moor" and sugar

Oswald de Andrade Manifesto Antropofago (the cannibal Manifesto), 1928 **Tipi of not Tupi**

Gilberto Freyre, *A Casa Grande e a Senzala*, 1933 Luso-tropicalism and foundational fictions-
the enchanted tropicalism and foundations fictions-the enchanted moorland, the 'sweetness' of
sugar plantations.

Some critiques of the ways that cultural history has been undertaken

culture as great works
claims to speak for a whole population
explains tradition as continuity
ignoring reception
grand narratives tend to miss everything else

Ch 3 rebel music.

Task: Read the chapter as a cultural history

Purpose: to see how focusing on music reveals aspects of past and present history not
otherwise available

Criteria: be able to use the chapter to discuss the study of popular culture

Drafting a Proposal for Research on Popular culture

The fundamental of a strong anthropological research paper :

A topic: what do you wish to research?

A question: what about your topic interests you? Why should it interest others

A lens: Whose work informs and influence as you ask your questions?

A method: precisely what original work will you be doing as part of your research?

popular reflection upon your research topic as well as academic

Sept 29

"conspicuous consumption"

The Frankfurt School

-Thinkers grounded in Marx in one way or another

-for us, the point is not if they (and Marx) are right or wrong but to understand a very influential
and also heterogeneous approach to popular culture

argued: text and practices must be analyzed in relation to their historical conditions of production.

But are different than other historicist approaches in that “historical conditions” are understood within a Marxist conception of history

Marx: “The mode of production of material life conditions of the social, political and intellectual life processes in general”

Each significant period in history is constructed around a particular ‘mode of production’: that is, the way in which a society is organized (i.e. slave, feudal, capitalist) to produce the necessities of life- food, shelter, etc.

The Culture Industry- Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1944)

- the “culture industry” designates the products and processes of mass culture
- Although cultural texts and practices can be active agents in historical change or the servants of social stability, they analyze pop culture as serving the latter
- the products of the culture industry, they claim, are marked by two features
 - Homogeneity, ‘film, radio, and magazines make up a system which is uniform, as a whole and in every part.... all mass culture is identical’
 - and predictability

oct 1

Culturalism

A key text “the analysis of culture: in the long revolution (1961) Raymond Williams

“three general categories in the definition of culture”

- 1) the ideal, in which culture is a state or process of human perfection in terms of certain absolute or universal values -> but practically speaking, how do you know perfection? how do you know that something is about or reveals the “universal human condition”
- 2) the ‘documentary’ record: the surviving texts and practices of a culture: “culture is the body of intellectual and imaginative work, in which, in a detailed way, human thought and experience are variously recorded.
- 3) the ‘social definition of culture, in which culture is a description of a particular way of life.

the social definition of culture that Williams proposed was an innovation; it legitimized the study of popular culture.

Culturalism, as he proposed it, was:

“the study of relationships between elements in a whole way of life”

Such innovation was necessary, he argued, because:

“we learn about each element as a precipitate but in the living experience of the time every element was in solution, an inseparable part of a complex whole” (63)

What are we getting at with “the study of relationships between elements in a whole way of life”?

Something like the ethos and the zeitgeist of a group of people in a specific time. The term Williams proposes for what cultural analysis is trying to grasp is the structure of feeling

“It is as firm and definite as ‘structure’ suggests, yet it operates in the most delicate and least tangible parts of our activity. In one sense, this structure is the culture of a period.

Ethos, Zeitgeist and Social Character

The oldest term is Ethos

ancient Greek, custom, usage, disposition, character

classical Latin ethos character, depiction of character

Began to come into most common use in English in the 1830s-1840s

“the characteristic spirit of a people, community, culture, or era as manifested in its attitudes and aspirations; the prevailing character of an institution or system”

Social character Erich Fromm (1942) Frankfurt School

‘social character’: is the shared character structure of a people, and is fundamentally adaptive of the mode of production

Zeitgeist

German, zeit time = geist spirit “the spirit of the times”

Began coming into its most common use in English in the 1840s

“the spirit or genius which marks the thought or feeling of a period or age.”

- If social character are the normative expectations and functional requirements for socially acceptable and desirable behaviour(fromm)
- then the structure of feeling refers rather to a ‘particular sense of life’ and ‘a community of experience’

“one generation may train its successor, with reasonable success, in the social character or the general cultural pattern, but the new generation will have its own structure of feeling, which will not appear to have come ‘from’ anywhere. For here, most distinctly, the changing organization is enacted in the organism: the new generation responds in its own ways to the unique world it is inheriting, taking up many continuities, that can be traced, and reproducing many aspects of the organization, which can be separately described, yet feeling its whole life in certain ways differently, and shaping its creative response in a new structure of feeling” (65)

Look for elements of Thorstein Veblen (1899) “conspicuous consumption” and the Frankfurt school’s “Mass culture” Some questions to ask while we watch these videos:

Is it possible to describe the general social character or ethos of a group of people (say, the US or Canada or what gets called ‘euro-american’)? in the past? now?

Are these videos proposing a certain characterization of an ethos or the zeitgeist?

Do you relate to it? can you talk about if you do or don’t in terms of a structure of feeling (for your generation?)

Stuart Hall (1932-2014) Jamaican-born cultural theorist based in Britain

Armet Francis (1945-) Jamaican-born photographer and publisher based in Britain. His photographs depicted “the underlying unity of the black people who colonization and slavery distributed across the African diaspora”

Hall writes that:

“identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within the narratives of the past.”

“histories have their real, material, and symbolic effects”

“the past continues to speak to us” but “it is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth”

To the question “talk about difference in identity?” Hall responds that identity is always a combination of both.

Identity and cultural differences are not represented in music, cinema, or other forms of popular culture, but constituted through them.

What might this dialogic framing of how we create our identities look like today? Taiye Selasi “Don’t ask where I’m from, ask where I’m a local”

she proposes “rituals, relationships and restriction.

in Rebel Music and in your own lives (in Canada or elsewhere”

What’s an example of soft power?

can you detail a specific government cultural initiative?

the form of popular culture?

the political agenda?

Can you describe the use of popular culture in a social movement?

REVIEW FOR MIDTERM

Frankfurt school-marxist cultural critics

describe significant definitions for: culture, for popular, and for popular culture

learn concepts from class & apply them

how music has been used by governments to push for social stability & give examples of music describing social conditions as a way to push for social change.

ex: From lectures and your reading in rebel music, describe a govt cultural initiative specifying the form of popular culture and the specific political agenda

Tropes: general term for figurative language

What do they do/how do they work?

pop culture

popular

culture

folklore, trope, tradition

Cultural history - eg. theatre critique

- you're missing most of it if you only focus on great works
- almost always focussed on the elite
- cultural history looked at tradition as a handing of the baton- ignores evolution
- excludes some of the story

ethos& zeitgeist

structures of feeling

marxist cultural criticism

frankfurt school

the culture industry

pop culture as mass culture

moral panic

diaspora

identity : Stuart Hall (Identity formation through imagined reunification) (

culturalism

conspicuous consumption

Moral entrepreneurs

Folk devils, Malcom X

Enchanted Mooress? What's sugar about
structures of feelings

Invented Traditions: are 'responses to novel situations which take the form of reference to old situations, or which establish their own past by a quasi-obligation repetition' - eric hobsbawm

Apocalyptic Ecologism in Dune

-Myths e.g. Butlerian Jihad, Bene Gesserit,

-Heroes/ Charismatic Leaders e.g. Paul Atreides (Maud'Dib)

Herbert "I wrote in the mid-60s what I hope would be an environmental handbook called *Dune*, a title chosen with the deliberate intent that it would echo the sound of doom"

You will co-write a story set in the future (you choose when. This could be 1 year or 10,000 years or any other time)

Explain through the story:

what happened in the 'past'?

What actions were not taken to reduce the greenhouse gases?

what were the consequences for the environment and for human lives of these actions?

describe what is happening in the time period in which your story is set.

how is daily life in the future the same or different due to the effects of climate change?

what political steps have been taken to address these changes?

what scientific steps have been taken

what scientific advances have been made?

Anthropocene

anthropos+cene

Greek *anthropos* 'human being,' ancient Greek *kalvos*, new, recent forming adjectives designating epochs and strata of the tertiary and quaternary periods, and nouns denoting such epochs

bridging metaphors, fear-mongering, apocalyptic scenarios: aspects of popular culture motivating people to acknowledge and act on the causes of climate change

'the era of the human'?

if climate change signifies a fundamentally new relationship between humans and the earth system, what does it now mean to be human? and how should we live? this is the old question of philosophy, the arts, literature and all kinds of popular culture.

From acting on the causes to asking how to live (and die) in the Anthropocene.

A term introduced into popular culture by biologist Eugene F. Stoermer and chemist Paul Crutzen in 2000 to propose a new geological era. They suggested it began around 1800 with the industrial revolution.

In 2005, paleoclimatologist William Ruddiman suggested that the Anthropocene began around 8000 years ago with the shift from hunter-gatherers to agriculture.

In 2011, Will Steffen et al. suggested it began in the 1950s in WWII with the exponential growth in industrialization, urbanization and pollution called “the great acceleration.”

the anthropocene is proposed to mark the era of geological time during which human activity has come to be the dominant influence on the environment, climate, and ecology of the earth.

For it to be geological time, it must be significant on the scale of earth history. There is much debate not about if change is occurring but about if it is possible to assess scale.

To summarize

There are ways in which mass pop culture (understood as the more or less homogenous, commercial, globally consumed products) are addressing the causes and consequences of climate change: documentaries, films, radio programs, tv etc.

Charles Lyell (1833) Principles of Geology

“The present is the key to the past”

-> now there is a shift to ‘the future is the key to the present’

Roy Scranton

“ The Biggest problem climate change poses isn’t how the department of defense should plan for resource wars, or how we should put up seawalls to protect Alphabet City, or when we should evacuate Hoboken. It won’t be addressed by buying a Prius, signing a treaty or turning off the air-conditioning, The biggest problem we face is a philosophical one: understanding that this civilization is already dead. The sooner we confront this problem, and the sooner we realize there’s nothing we can do to save ourselves, the sooner we can get down to the hard work of adapting, with mortal humility, to our new reality.”

t/f wsection with a fill-in-the-blank part and short answer questions.

Dec- 15- your final exam is due in FSS 10008 (my office) between 2-5 pm

There will also be an essay question: this will consist of one or more prompts in response to which you will write an essay (800-1000 words). Example of a prompt “insert title of your story is a critique of. discuss.

Your group story should have a title, one or more characters, and a plot that make an implicit argument about climate change.

Your essay will make that arguments EXPLICIT

Each student should write part of the story and initial the paragraphs for which you feel the most responsible.

Ideology (review)

Bertolt Brecht: Cultural texts (movies, Tv shows, short stories etc.) present a certain image of the world

Stuart Hall: Culture is a site where

- 1) collective social understandings are created
- 2) a terrain on which 'the politics of signification' are played out in attempts to win people to particular ways of seeing the world.

"good or bad, a play always includes an image of the world... There is no play and no theatrical performance which does not in some way affect the dispositions and conceptions of the audience. Art is never without consequences."

Roland barthes on myth in mythologies

Myths are the secondary, often unconscious meanings that tesxts and practices carry or can be made to carry
how do they 'operate'?"

"The starting point of these reflections was usually a feeling of impatience at the sight of the 'naturalness' with which newspaper, art and commonsense....."

Semiotics

Myths for Bathes

Second order semillogical system, a "meta-language"

A sign of the first semillogical system (linguistic) became a raw signifier in the mythological system

In other words: the myths make symbols into the "raw material" of the next level of meaning
it is "natural" that the black cat means bad luck, we don't need to think about it

According to media clture, is unnecessary know about the historical formation of the black cat as a symbol (christianity)

but signs can also be polysemic

Myth in antiquity

Narratives about gods, heroes, fantastic beings who tell us why the world is organized as it is

The ancient myths were not obvious- they were complicated. Many philosophers, including Plato, discussed their inner meaning
Ancient myths were deep: suitable for speculation
Modern myths according to Barthes

Simple narratives, often presented by media that express the obviousness and inevitable condition of the social order, status quo, where we live
Barthes argues that modern myths are dangerous, and we must unveil the ideological messages hidden in their discourse.

Barthes: tripartite meaning process

Object or signifier could signify several meanings
In a certain context is connected to a certain concept (tied to significance)
the signifier with a clear meaning become a symbol with a certain historical and cultural background.

Chat noir by theophile steinlen

Many of the posters were produced, to advertise the local 'cabaret' owned by aristide bruant, created in 1881 as a venue for performers/ nightclub for artists
elegant and luxurious body
perfect balance of mass advertisement (in the right language) and art

Roland Barthes (1915-1980_

Influenced by saussure and Marxism
Mythologies (1957)
The most journalistic of all the Barthes; books, probably the most popular

No organic development

Fragmentary: the chapters were articles written every month

Themes: myths of French popular culture and daily life.

Myths 1954-1956, later compiled into mythologies

The essays were written every month for two years, from 1954 to 1956

Topics suggested by current events and media (articles, films, shows, exhibitions)

Barthes tried to reflect on myths of French daily life

He was upset with the naturalness and simplicity with which newspapers and “common sense” dress up a reality determined by history
Confusion between “Nature” and “History” (what is natural and what is contingent on human action/history)

Ideological abuse of this confusion

A modern myth is the language of the falsely obvious: the mythologist should unmask the mystification that transforms myths of middle class as universal and natural facts.

Myth analyzed by Barthes: The Black African Soldier and Empire

Meaning of the African Soldier's image

France is a great empire and her sons faithfully serve under one flag

signifier black soldier

signified: frenchness, militarism

the images in fact contain a long story, connected to history to certain knowledge of reality but the mythological system is impoverished: the african soldier is considered a spontaneous, indisputable image

the myth doesn't suppress meaning, it only impoverishes it: the message loses some of the crucial historical knowledge and appeals to a certain group of readers (the french middle class who support colonialism)

Same concept, different signifiers

In myth, the same concept (french imperialism) could be represented by several different forms or signifiers.

The last chapter of Mythologies is theoretical : “Myths today”

Myth is a kind of speech, a language that is connected to a particular historical time (french colonialism, mass media readership)

Myths may be ancient, but generally are not eternal : particularly today, a myth may disappear rapidly in the media

Semiotics for Barthes is always connected to some historical background

Anything (film, photo, article) could be transformed in a myth

Pictures are more imperative than writing, yet they become a kind of writing when they are connected to certain meanings

Barthes observes a series of distortions:

Myth distorts reality but it doesn't erase it: the African soldier is deprived of his own history and memory but not of his actual lived existence (even though shaped by the myth)

The sign is only half-amputate in the myth

Myth is stolen and replaced speech: it took a sign from somewhere in time and placed it in another context

The concept deforms rather than abolishes

The signifier become arbitrary, natural, frozen, eternalized: the French empire at the time was considered a natural, obvious fact

The myth of media culture is that it looks general and neutral

the history that caused the phenomenon is erased.

Poor, incomplete images

Barthes argued that myths prefer to work with poor, incomplete images, ready for ideological significations

e.g. he gave us an example that there are inexhaustible stores of simple images ready to be used for militaristic purposes.

Saving Jessica Lynch: the movie

Fiction film

With saving private ryan (1998) still in the public psyche, it was a tailor-made adventure to reinforce support for the campaign in Iraq

What the mythological photos do not 'say'

female soldier example: many female soldiers say they are sexually assaulted by their male comrades and can't trust the military to protect them e.g. "he knife wasn't for the iraqis. It was for the guys on my own side"

The violence of the war inflicted on the local population (we see a sunset, helicopter,s and awoman's face.)

Switzerlans : posters against minarets on mosques

the recent posters against minarets shows also the western fear of the popularity of burka and of female terrorism

the connection between minarets, burka and terrorism is in fact ideological, bit it is presented as a 'natural' combination of things.

Barhtes: obviousness of myths

Myth transform a meaning in an obvious form: itis language robbery, it becomes something unquestionalbe, justified in excess, it has become a natural fact

Barthes: the role of the scholar

The media often focus only on signifiers, considering them the 'obvious' representation of a concept

Myth is not a lie, it's an inflection, a distortion: the naturalization and trivialization of objects, concepts and history

the scholar should distinguish signifier and significance, the representation and the concepts

Focus on the mechanism of production of myths, in order to be able to :
connect the myth and general history,
show how it corresponds to the interest of a sector of a society
provide evidence of how it is masked as innocent or fashion

Barthes' Myths

Myths are the naturalization of ideology, an artifact of history made to seem natural and inalienable.

Adbertising is example: it is about creating desires

Speculative Fiction

Science fiction (short stories, books, movies, tv shows) dream up plausible futures and ask “what would it be like to live in those future?”

Ursula Le Guin “science fiction is not predictive, it is descriptive.”
and also imaginative

Utopic Futures

A utopia is any place or state of idealized perfection

The fruitarians represent one aspirational ideal, focussed around food and a “natural” lifestyle.