

CMN2180: Exam Review Notes

Lecture 1: Pop Culture Intro (Cultural Studies' Perspective)

Culture:

- Denotes all knowledges, technologies, values, beliefs, customs, and behaviours common to people
- Simple societies: may have only a single integrated culture shared by everyone
- Complex societies: accommodate many layers and levels of cultures and subcultures
- To study pop culture is to study modern society

High Culture:

- Includes things like classical music, serious novels, poetry, dance, high or “fine” art, and other cultural products which are usually appreciate by only a relatively small number of educated people
- VERSUS popular culture where “popular used to mean: low, base, vulgar, or common people

Pop culture:

- Mass culture, everyday culture; mass consumed & mass mediated

Various takes on pop culture:

- “Leftover” culture
- Quantitative approach
 - Something mass produced as opposed to one piece of art that an artist poured their heart and soul into
 - Often mass produced for profit
 - Impersonal production, commodities to be sold)
- Mass culture
- Culture of the people
 - Comes from the bottom up (people → corporations)
 - Marx: superstructure (politics, philosophy, ideology) and base (proletariat: labour, economy, workers)
 - Base determines how superstructure is going to operate (in egalitarian society)
 - In high brow culture, those who own the companies of production dictate what’s low end and what’s elite (in capitalist society)
- Culture of the resistance
 - Resistance against victorian standards of beauty and culture (ex punk culture)
 - Moral panic against this subculture (punk); media picked it up as a “style” and corporations began producing clothes etc for it and movement lost its meaning
 - Similar process took place with hip hop (subculture becomes mainstream)

- Blurring hierarchy between high and low cultural production and consumption
 - Example: movies like *Shakespeare in Love* and places like Las Vegas
 - Accessible representations/simulations of high culture items blur the line between high and low brow
- Cultural studies
 - Developed as an attempt to assess, understand, and explore the role of culture in everyday life
 - Arguing that notion of culture must be expanded to include aspects of pop culture such as magazines, newspaper, and other products of media industries, cultural studies analyzes the ways in which meaning is constructed in these artifacts or “texts”
 - First three authors in this field: Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, E.P. Thompson

Richard Hoggart: *The Uses of Literacy* (1958)

- Chronicles existence (and eventually the demise) of a strong working-class culture in the early 20th century
- Broadens the application of literary studies to take in newspapers, magazines, popular music and so on
- Examines the interconnections between these and the structures of individual’s everyday lives, especially what he calls the working class
- The personal experience of the working class culture was at odds with the scholarly tradition of Britain that devalued and marginalized such cultures

Raymond Williams: *Culture and Society, 1790-1950* (1958) and *The Long Revolution* (1961)

- Aesthetic judgements as to what constitutes “bad” and “good” create hierarchical relationships between the culture of the affluent and the culture of the working classes
- Explains process by which culture serves to reinforce hierarchical relationships w/in society
- “Culture is ordinary; that is the first fact”
- ““We use the word culture in these two senses: to mean a whole way of life--the common meanings; to mean the arts and learning--the special processes of discovery and creative effort. Some writers reserve the word for one or other of these senses; I insist on both, and on the significance of their conjunction. The questions I ask about our culture are questions about deep personal meanings. Culture is ordinary, in every society and in every mind.”
- So, while culture is seen as an important way in which individuals participate in their community, it is also critically regarded as a means by which unequal, hierarchical, social relations are continually reinforced
- Culture as a negotiation between base and superstructure

E.P. Thompson: *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963)

- Class as a process and not as a thing (not born with or without it)
- Moves away from statistical and economic explanations (if you make a certain amount of money you belong to a certain class) of class to the daily experiences and relationships of communities
- Class, as gender and race, is a construct

Contributions

- Development of an approach to cultural inquiry that engages with pop culture critically and thoughtfully and methodically
- Shouldn't assume that the systems in place are natural and right
- Attempt to understand the connection between culture and society in a way that did not reproduce the dominant assumptions but rather questioned them
- Opened the door to identity studies, diaspora studies, feminist studies and so on...

Purpose

- Cultural studies → poses questions that are specifically concerned with the means by which society reinforces and maintains itself and its social norms, the role of culture (and specifically mass media) in this process, and the ways in which individuals receive, consume, and engage with mass-mediated culture -(A.M. Kinahan, Wilfred Laurier University)

Lecture 2: The Celebrity (Brand and Cult of Personality)

What is a brand?

- Brand = mental shorthand (similar to a reputation)
- For example: Walmart is known for low prices and wide selection
- Feeling that you have towards particular organization/person/place
- Our society is brand saturated (we are constantly surrounded by so many different brands)

Celebrities

- Celebritas (from latin): fame, everyone knows you
- Famous within context of everyday life
- Known for being well-known accumulation of attention capital
- Require imitative consumption
- Help production and consumption (celebs = product of capitalist society)
- Motivated by sex, money, and power
- Narcissistic

Co-branding

- Brand image: perceptions about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumer memory

- Celebrity image: perceptions about an individual who enjoys public recognition as reflected by the celebrity associations held in consumer memory
- Co-branding: pairing of two or more brands
 - Dates back to potter Josiah Wedgwood in 18th century (advertised his pottery with “it’s good enough for Her Majesty
 - All parties benefit
 - Motivated by profit and production of commodities
 - Media technology allows people to feel as though they have personal connections with celebrities (part of reason why co-branding is so effective)
- In 2003 Nike spent \$1.44 billion on celeb endorsements (ex Tiger Woods and Michael Jordan)

Effective Branding

- 1) Celebrity credibility: do we believe the celeb knows what he/she is talking about
- 2) Celebrity attractiveness: attractiveness linked to memorability, status, attention
- 3) Celebrity-product congruence: Nike needs sports athletes
- 4) Celebrity multiplicity: use of several celebs widens appeal
- 5) Celebrity activation: celebrity persona (private life, activities, accomplishments) acknowledged and used in branding

Cult of Personality

- Use of various means (mass media) to build an image and to increase popularity
- Historically used in authoritarian societies and regimes
- Idealized, heroic, mythical, and iconic leader
- Charismatic authority that, by definition, motivates
 - charisma→ motivates others, people follow it, can provide answers to difficult questions, promise change
- Celebrities as the new gods; politicians as gods, kings, etc.

Semiotics

- Ferdinand de Saussure: Signs and semiotics
- Signifier: sound or image used to represent
- Signified: concept or idea being represented
- Signifier + signified = sign

Value

- Sign value: what the product means to us (branding) → celebrities have sign value
- Use value: what a product can be used for
- Exchange value: what a product can be traded for
 - Commodities traded for other commodities vs commodities traded for cash
 - capitalism→ today’s dominant ideology wherein emphasis is placed on “free market” economics, “invisible hand” theory and individual pursuit of wealth

- Growth and surplus (profit) are goals
- Use value + sign value = exchange value

Critical Theory

- Ideology: “set of ideas, values, tastes and/or beliefs expounded by a particular social group, organization, religion or culture”
- Value is ideologically determined
 - Value surrounded celebrities = capitalist ideology

Celebrities and Society

- For celebrities to uphold this central premise of capitalism, they have to be *talented* → they must be good at something: **use value**
 - Celebs have high sign value and exchange value → it is the use value that differentiates usually
- Chris Rojek (2011)
 - Ascribed celebrity (born into celebrity like royal family): **low** use value
 - Achieved celebrity (famous for being good at something like Meryl Streep): **high** use value
 - Attributed celebrity (media decides they should be celebrities): **low (no)**_use value
- P. David Marshall (1997)
 - Different uses such as music, movies, television

Celebrity following

- May require and may include
 - High level of commitment
 - Mimic social behaviour
 - Intimidation involving guilt, fear and shame
 - Critical thinking can be subdued
 - Straight hierarchy
 - Formal and informal systems of influence

Why do we follow?

- Attempt to recreate traditional ties in modern society
- Desire for acceptance and meaning
- Offering community
- Socio-cultural cohesion
- Modern society characterized by: anonymity, change, feeling like we don't belong, individuality
- Before, we were born into a family/tribe and you had no choice in the matter
 - Now, we have the freedom of choice regarding which community we would like to be a part of

Lecture 3: Reality TV (Discourse Analysis)

Questions

- What are the discourse practices that characterize the Reality TV genre in North America?
- Is it globalized?
- Is it specific to context and audience?
 - Yes because it has to do with what kind of language they're using
 - No because the content and structure can be adapted to fit the audience/context

How real is Reality TV?

- Supposedly:
 - A radical departure from traditional programming
 - Spectacle of actuality
 - Documenting the self expression of ordinary people
 - Unscripted and hybrid form (similar to improv)
 - Captures real-life situations and reactions
- Relatively unknown cast
 - Exceptions: shows that cast “stars that have fallen” or “has-beens”
- Celebrity as cultural commodity... and disposable

What is discourse?

- How we think, account (narrative), communicate, and structure our knowledge about people
- Ways by which we constitute knowledge along with social practices
- How relations of power are disseminated in social and cultural life
- Discourse can sometimes help us identify power relations OR it can convince us that certain power relations are natural and normal

Discourse analysis

- Tool to study meaning
- Meaning is discursive
- Structures of meaning are related to power structures
- Patterns, forms, processes, of production and comprehension of a text
- How language and speech interact with the social context

Critical discourse analysis (CDA)

- Examines the use of language and speech (including other modalities, pictures, sounds) in relation to the ideological context
- How the texts reflects gender, identity, ethnicity, class, etc. in a text

- CDA reflects a) power relations; socio-cultural issues; reproduction and maintenance of ideologies; reproduction of social relations
- Explain the hegemony of discourse and how it works

CDA asks

- How are the issues and themes framed?
- How are the notions foregrounded and explained?
- How is language used to support ideologies? (repetition, multimodalities, topics, relations of characters and what they represent in the narrative, etc.)
- CDA should question and reveal the interests, position, values, and perspectives
 - What is the first impression they want us to get from the program?
 - What tools are used to communicate language?
- CDA should investigate why discourses are used in particular ways

First level questions?

- What is the story? What is the obvious discourse encoded?
- How do they get you to watch? What attracts you?
- What is the conventional intention behind it?
- Is it heartwarming?
- Does it equalize power?
- Whose stories are they telling?
- What is the primary story? The secondary ones?
- How are the characters defined, portrayed, and identified?
- Ex. undercover boss episodes have a formula → every episode has same basic formula that works to get you hooked

Class in Reality TV?

- What is class? (ie Marxist criteria)
- How is it defined?
- How is it represented?
- What is the discourse within the Meta-discourse?
- What does it dilute or distract from? What is the overarching paradigm?

Lecture 4: Identity, Image and Practice (subculture, rituals, and symbolic interactionism with fashion)

Identity and pop culture

- Selfhood in “new times”
- Identity matters more now because of more available choices (identities are not waiting for us) → fluidity and mobility in modern society

- We have ability to move socially and have choices in terms of where we want to belong, how we define ourselves, making decision based on choice not obligation
- Ideas of selection and self-narration
- Identity emerges in the social sphere and in temporal relations
 - Temporal relations: your identity will change between 15, 20, 40, etc.
- Identity is also forged in everyday social practices
 - Tied to small interaction with those around us

Identity as a meeting place

- Relational
- Contextually specific
- Changes over the life course
- Social mobility, community, and recuperation

Impact of popular culture on identity

- In what way are the symbols embraced by the general public?
- Frankfurt School: society is passive and consumes whatever the culture industries produce as pop culture
- Others (post-modern): identity construction and identity narration, creation of one's individual identity

Pop culture as container of identity

- Individuality determined by peer authority and pop culture because modern societies lack authoritative cultural values
- Pop culture portrays proper identity ideals
- "Borrowing" of material to construct identity
- Ex. Pamela (Style by Jury) at the therapist → made collages using only pictures from magazines (pop culture sources)

Subcultures

- Subcultures are known to use the body for identity issues, expression of difference, rebellion, and ideology
- Subcultures are distinct from the larger culture but borrow its symbols, values, and beliefs (with distortion, exaggeration, and inversion)
- Subcultures form as a collective solution to, or resolution of, problems arising from the blocked aspirations of members or their ambiguous position in the wider society
- Subcultures take something non-mainstream, make it mainstream, then abandons it (transforms it then gets rid of it)
- Style by jury: focus on one individual and looks at their individual issue (ex. Pamela has issues with aging → show makes it seem as though that's her problem and not a societal issue (ageism))

- Subtly stresses that there's nothing wrong with society, it's the individuals that have issues

Rituals

- Many subcultures use rituals
- Rituals are activities (manifest or latent or a group of actions that have a symbolic value to a community, culture, group)
- Rituals express shared beliefs of a particular society or group and express the particularity of an identity
- Rituals have symbols that are not arbitrarily chosen
- Signification is determined by the group
- Some symbols show that you belong to a certain community
- Rituals, unlike everyday symbols, are not arbitrarily chosen
- Signification: ideological connection

Subversion

- An attempt to transform the established order
 - This could refer to social order, to the order of social meaning, to the order of power, etc.
- Mainly, it refers to a disruption of meaning, thus casting doubt on the meaning, on the ability to read signs and categorize them
- This means that things *do not mean what they meant anymore*

Symbolic Interactionism

- Herbert Blumer: "Social Psychology" (1937)
 - We give meaning to objects; each object is given meaning by social context, psychological meaning and MOSTLY through interacting with others
- "Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method" (1969)
- Objects have meaning to people and people view these objects according to their given meaning
- Social interaction determines meaning. Meaning changes through interpretation and through time
- Assumptions:
 - People are not reactive but interactive
 - The use of symbols and signification in human interaction
 - People's actions are determined by how they view a situation

Punk Origins

- Emerged in late 1970s (Britain)
- Opposing the dominant culture or mainstream of society
- British youths responding to boredom and social issues such as political instability and rising unemployment

- Punk music
 - Bands such as *The Sex Pistols* and *The Ramones* helped spread the subculture
 - Lyrics were confrontational and anti-establishment
 - Ex. God Save the Queen
- Punk ideologies:
 - The world and people in it are corrupt
 - Freedom of the individual
 - Anti-authoritarianism
 - Anarchy
 - Free thought
 - Self-production and distribution ethics (anti-capitalism)

Lecture 5: Food as a Signifier

Who tosses pizza dough?

- We take food for granted- we eat without considering the gender, power, and social politics behind it
- Pizza dough tossers are typically male but in Lebanon (for example) tossing mountain bread is usually a female role
- Men typically do the barbecuing (which is outside) → gender roles dictate that men handle social duties while women handle domestic duties

Roland Barthes (1915-1980): *Mythologies* (1957)

- *Mythologies* is dedicated entirely to unmasking of bourgeois ideology
 - Mythology (per Barthes) means the group of attitudes and values that make us believe that such a signifier corresponds naturally to this signified
- Food functions as a sign → embedded meaning and embedded relations
- It has a chain of meanings
- Food is a “situation” → ex coffee (caffeine used to be used as a medication but now it’s a social activity, a daily routine)
- Food in different contexts, times, uses, have different meanings and connotation
- Pizza: easy to eat, cheap, etc

Food as a signifier

- Cultural signifier
- Class signifier
- Ideological signifier
- Ie religious, ethnic, and gender difference
- Exploration of culture through food
- Food connected to ritual and culture

Connotation and Myth

- Connotation: latent meaning
- Denotation: apparent meaning
- Ex: Rolls-Royce
- Denotation: particular make of car
- Connotation: (extra association) wealth and luxury
- Myth: ways of thinking that are structured to send particular messages and ideas to the readers of the text.
- The bringing together of signs and their connotations to shape a particular message

Food as domination of nature

- Success of human rationality over nature
- Instrumental reason over instinct and chaos
- Enlightenment over ignorance
- Ordering the world

Lecture 6: Function of Humour in Pop Culture

Mikhail Bakhtin: the carnival and the grotesque

- Russian intellectual/philosopher (1895-1975)
- In the 1940's: dissertation on the French Renaissance writer Francois Rabelais
- *Rabelais and Folk Culture of the Middle Ages and Renaissance* (1965)
- In his discussion of Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Bakhtin attempts to analyse the Renaissance social system. He underlines the presence of two important subtexts: **carnival** (the carnivalesque, a social institution) and the grotesque realism
- As one of the strongest expressions of popular culture, carnival is associated with the collectivity
- People attending carnival defy socioeconomic and political organisation. Ordinary life is temporarily suspended and conventions and hierarchies are momentarily reversed
- Subversion of the dichotomy noble vs trivial, sophistication vs rudeness, sacred vs profane, etc.

Carnivalesque

- People feel they are part of the collectivity and this is when people cease to be themselves and can exchange bodies and be renewed through costume and mask
- The carnivalesque is a literary mode that subverts and liberates the assumptions of the dominant style or atmosphere through humour and chaos

Talk Shows

- They link together the expression of personal experience with the personifications of social issues and problems, providing relevance, and giving relevance to various

voices “providing the opportunity for legitimation through consent together with the danger of discovery” (Livingstone and Lunt, 1994)

- Function of the show is to establish a bond with the audience (ex: living room feel to the set; moments of illumination)
- Host is an intermediary

Humour: Back to Subversion

- Subversion through culture jamming attempts to recreate a dialogue in the public sphere and to break the monologue of the dominant authorities and mainstream elites

Some positive perceptions of talk shows

- Forum for stigma management
- Effect on the public’s attitude towards members of a marginalized group
- An alternative group
- Private issues become public

Significance

- It pointed to the existence of civil society which traditional authorities both masked and contained but which was willing to disagree with and exceed the parameters of those authorities
- The show offered itself as a public space

Theorizing the humorous talk

- Inversion and suspension of traditional power
- Civil society undermines authority, and its worldview
- Assertion of dissensus as democratic process rather than conventional consensus

Lecture 7: Critical Theory (The Frankfurt School and Habermas)

Critical theory

- Diagnostic and remedial:
 - A) identify the wrongs in society
 - B) identify progressive aspects that help the amelioration of society
- Questions, exposes and analyzes power relations under various conditions

Frankfurt School

- Small group of philosophers, called critical theorists, who worked under the direction of Max Horkheimer (1895-1973) and Theodor Adorno (1903-1969)
- Critiqued the “culture industry” of the US as distracting the public from real social issues because of the channels, content, and form of the *ideological* goods and services it provides and circulates

Cultural Industry

- The industries that have a cultural role- such as creating, producing, and commercializing content.
 - Include: advertising, architecture, crafts, fashion, film, printing, publishing and multimedia, audiovisual and cinematic productions, and so forth

What is “ideology”?

- It is a systems of ideas that attempts to explain the world
- Set of Ideas and ideals that are shared by a group of people (eg a nation, a political party, etc.)

Frankfurt School

- Entertainment industry mass distracts
- Produces disenchantment and thus motivation to consume
- All is reduced to the benefit of the entertainment formula and market logic

Hollywood

- Fascinated by the cult of personality and use of propaganda techniques
- Fascinated by authoritarian figures
- Hollywood and the american dream:
 - The promise of happiness is in the present and not in the future
 - The idea that Utopia (the perfect society is already here
 - Consumption of what is and not what could be
- Mass media is the product of an industry that produces in series following the market logic

- Standardized culture
- Suppression of context and production and reception
- Fascinated by superficial effects
- Individualization of the social problems
- These strategies distract us from the real conditions
- Narcissism
- Creation of Ideal Types that require constant preoccupation with appearance

So what?

- Mass distraction weakens the public sphere and democracy (Habermas)

The public sphere

- Term introduced in 1962 → published in doctoral thesis “Public Space”
- According to Habermas→ public sphere is the sphere of individuals assembled in public for “public use of reason”
- Existence of public sphere is co-existent with the existence of modernity

Debate

- Participation: each gives opinion, consent to follow norms, each has to propose own norms, etc...
- Modern societies provided the organisms that have the function to create the conditions that allow for mutual consent
- Historically, the public sphere emerged in the moment when the monarchy a church power started to become weak
- The new power in face of religion → bourgeois public

Forms of debate today?

- Image based
- Visual culture
- Short attention span
- Engagement is conditional
- But resistance exists (under what conditions?)

Downside

- The media do not inform us anymore, they do not expand public debate
 - They amuse and distract us → pessimist view of Habermas because of his links to Frankfurt school
- However, in 1992, Habermas said that the media (independent from corporate control) can play a role of resistance and subversion

Lecture 8: Race, Representation and Orientalism

What is representation?

- It is a constructed presentation; it is not real
- It is a depiction of a presentation, which is itself not real
- Every representation carries within it a constructed meaning, circulated or bridged by language
- A representation is also a sign system

The “problem” of Representation

- **Stuart Hall:** “Reality exists outside language, but it is constantly mediated by and through language: and what we can know and say has to be produced in and through discourse. Discursive ‘knowledge’ is the product not of the transparent representation of the ‘real’ in language but of the articulation of language on real relations and conditions” (Hall, 1993, pp. 95)
- (Discursive) Codes can become naturalized
- Media use their own representational codes, which can also become neutralized

Stereotypes

- Are short-hands for communicating an idea, loaded with meaning that has already acquired a social consensus
- Power: with those who can construct that shared “hegemonic” meaning
 - Hegemony: leadership or dominance, especially by one country or social group over others

Race Talk

- Long established view about race as fixed and given, unchanging and unchangeable
- Race is perceived as an assigned analytical value as determinants of behaviour as to how people are and what they do as members of a racialized group
- Racialized groups as homogeneous
- Race is subject to a social hierarchy
- Race is constructed as an essence, a natural phenomenon whose meaning is beyond human intervention and is biologically deterministic

The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life (1994)

- Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray
- America was swamped by social problems strongly correlated with low intelligence
- Suggested that no level of social engineering could change the situation
- IQ was determined by genetics and measured