

Topic

Culture definition

- Raymond Williams – three definitions
- First – culture can be general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development = e.g. cultural developments of western Europe and be referring to philosophers, artists and poets
- Second – a particular way of life – whether of a group of people, a period or a group – hence the development of literacy, holidays, sports, religious festivals etc. Lived cultures or cultural practices
- Third – culture can be used to refer to the works and practices of intellectual and artistic activity – texts and practices whose function is to signify – signifying practices (e.g. art, ballet, soap operas, pop music etc.).

Popular culture

- Popular culture links the domains of the public and private and blurs the borders more than any other institution or practice – for More people , regardless of age, gender or ethnicity
- Popular is defined in a number of ways

Defining popular culture - brief definitions

- six different definitions of popular culture
 1. Well liked by many
 2. Anything that is not high culture
 3. Mass commercially produced culture
 4. Culture from the people – authentic culture
 5. Popular culture as a struggle between subordinate and dominant groups in society
 6. Popular culture in the context of postmodernism

Well liked

- Popular culture is simply culture which is well liked by many – sales of products etc.

Anything Not High Culture

- Popular culture is the culture which is left over after we have decided what is high culture
- i.e. a residual category
- Some suggest that to be culturally worthwhile it has to be difficult – which guarantees exclusivity of its audience – Bourdieu notes how this supports class distinctions, where popular culture is mass produced commercial culture and high culture is the result of an individual act of creation.

- Those who highlight such viewpoints suggest that such divisions are fixed – we can clearly argue against this e.g. Shakespeare now seen as the epitome of high culture but his work was part of popular theatre, and similarly Pavarotti being number 1 in the British pop charts.

Popular culture as mass culture –

- From this viewpoint popular culture is seen as commercial, Produced for mass consumption
- Its audience is a mass of non-discriminating consumers
- The culture is formulaic and manipulative, consumed by passive audience.
- Also has been associated with imported American culture

Americanisation

- Where popular culture is claimed to be American culture and is associated with Americanisation
- If the forms of provided commercial popular culture are not purely manipulative then it is because alongside the false appeals, trivialisation etc. there are elements of recognition and identification

Originating from the people

- Popular culture - is the culture which originates from the people by the people rather than imposed from above
- It is used to indicate an authentic culture of the people
- Often equated with romanticised concept of working class culture
- However, people do not spontaneously produce culture from raw materials of their own making
- Its raw materials are those which are commercially provided.

Subordinate v dominant group

- Gramsci differs from Marxist versions in that we agree to our domination in the Gramscian viewpoint.
- Popular culture and popular cultural texts are sites of resistance and struggle.
- In the Marxist viewpoint, the dominant group gains the consent of the subordinate group through deception.

Texts

- A text is made up of a contradictory mix of different cultural forces
- How these elements are articulated will depend in part on the social circumstances and historical conditions of production and consumption
- Hall uses William's insights to construct a theory of reading positions – subordinate, dominant, negotiated

Class

- The term popular has a complex relation to the term class
- The term class and popular are deeply related but they are absolutely not interchangeable
- Class cultures tend to intersect and overlap
- Popular culture is one of the sites where this struggle for and against a culture of the power is engaged

Hegemonic theory

- Popular culture is one which draws on the political analysis of Gramsci
- Gramsci uses the term hegemony to refer to the way in which dominant groups in society – through a process of intellectual and moral leadership - seek to win the consent of the subordinate groups in society
- Cultural theorists use Gramsci's political concept and use it to explain the nature and politics of popular culture
- Sometimes referred to as neo-Gramscian hegemony theory
- Where popular culture is a site of struggle between the resistance of subordinate groups in society and the forces of incorporation operating in the interests of the dominant groups in society

Hegemonic theory

- Hegemonic theory can be used to explore and explain conflicts involving ethnicity, race, gender, generation, sexuality etc.
- The key concept is **ARTICULATION** – to mean both to express and to join together
- The conservative party political broadcast, reveals this in action
- Articulation is what we take from popular culture in order to cement our identity

Session 1: Part 2

Ideology

- Crucial concept in the study of popular culture
- But it is different from culture
- When one says the word ideology – politics is present
- Ideology has been used to refer to the same conceptual terrain as culture and popular culture
- **1. Ideology can refer to a systematic body of ideas articulated by a particular group of people e.g. professional ideology – of professional groups, or the Labour Party**
- **2. Ideology – suggests a masking, distortion, concealment**
- How some cultural texts and practices present distorted images of reality and produce false consciousness
- These work, it is argued, in the interests of the powerful against the interests of the powerless.

- **3. Ideology refers to ideological forms**

- This draws attention to the way in which texts – television fiction, pop songs, novels, feature films etc. – always present a particular image of the world
- Texts are said to take sides, consciously or unconsciously
- Brecht – summarises the point – good or bad, a play always includes an image of the world... art is never without consequences

- **4. A definition of ideology developed in the 70s and 80s by Louis Althusser**

- Ideology is not just a body of ideas, but as a material practice
- Ideology is encountered in the practices of everyday life and not simply in certain ideas about everyday life
- The way in which certain rituals and customs have the effect of binding us to the social order

- **5. A definition of ideology associated with the work of Roland Barthes.**

- Barthes argues the ideology operates mainly at the level of connotations, the secondary, often unconscious meanings that texts and practices carry, or can be made to carry
- Ideology (or myth as Barthes calls it) is the terrain on which takes place a hegemonic struggle to restrict connotations, to fix particular connotations, to produce new connotations.
- Ideology is the attempt to make universal and legitimate what is partial and particular
- An attempt to pass off that which is cultural as something which is natural
- Similarly, it could be argued that in British society, white masculine, heterosexual, middle class, are unmarked in the sense they are normal, the natural, the universal – from other ways of being which are an inferior variation on original.

Discourse

- Discourse is a way of referring to or constructing knowledge about a particular topic
- A cluster of ideas, images and practices or ways of talking about something
- We make sense of the world through discourses
- For example, the discourses surrounding masculinity and femininity actually mean that we are placed according to those discourses.
- The norm is not mentioned because it is assumed. For example, when discussing footballers, the fact they are male does not need to be mentioned as this is assumed to be the norm by which other things are measured.
- Hence, other footballers are placed into subject positions against the discourse of male, heterosexuality as footballers.
- Discourses produce knowledge and this is never neutral.

Slide - Essentialist versus non-essentialist identities

1. **Essentialist definitions** of identity suggests that there are clear, authentic sets of characteristics which all groups belonging to a specific identity share and which do not alter across time
2. A **non-essentialist** definition focuses on differences, as well as common or shared characteristics
3. This raises questions such as **is identity fixed**, or fluid
4. Does identity also depend on others – whether that is family or group identity

What is identity

1. Identity might provide us with the means of answering the question **'Who AM I'**
2. We may share personality traits with other people, but **sharing an identity** suggests some **active engagement on** our part
3. We choose to identify with a **particular identity or group**
4. We can explore the importance of structures – the forces beyond our control which shape our identities

Differences

1. We all want to identify with one group of people
2. In doing so, it marks us **as different from other groups** of people
3. Identity is marked by **similarity and difference** from others

Internal and external

1. Identity involves the **internal and the subjective**, and the **external**
2. It is a socially recognised position, recognised by others as well as me
3. But sometimes **how I see myself** and **how others see me** does not always fit
4. There are **examples of multiple identities** that we have
5. **Identities are not unified** – there may be **contradictions within**

Examples

- **Claude Levi-Strauss** used the example of **food** where the **food we consume establishes an identity** between us as human beings (culture) and our food (nature)
- **Cooking is a language** in which we speak about ourselves and our places in the world
- What **we eat can tell a lot** about **who we are and the culture** within which we live
- Other forms of popular culture also do this – such as music we engage with, films or programmes we like to watch, clothes we wear, where we like to shop, whether we play video games (or not), get involved in social media (or not) etc.

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