

Literature, Culture and Media
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Lecture – 33
Media and Culture II

Dear participants, welcome to the third module of this week. In the previous modules we have seen how the consequences of technological development in the western world have had major significance for the development of mankind and our culture.

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- Western techno-power and its consequences for human subjects across the world
 - 20th Century media and technology created new ways of recognizing and identifying the world one wants to be a part of.
- How new technology and the technological forms of media and information have radically transformed social and cultural experiences and the nature of reality.
- Affordability and wider availability of media, fueled cultural and social changes
- Immediacy and simultaneity of ideas and events
- Understandings of 'Culture' also changed
- Interconnections become more resilient and operative

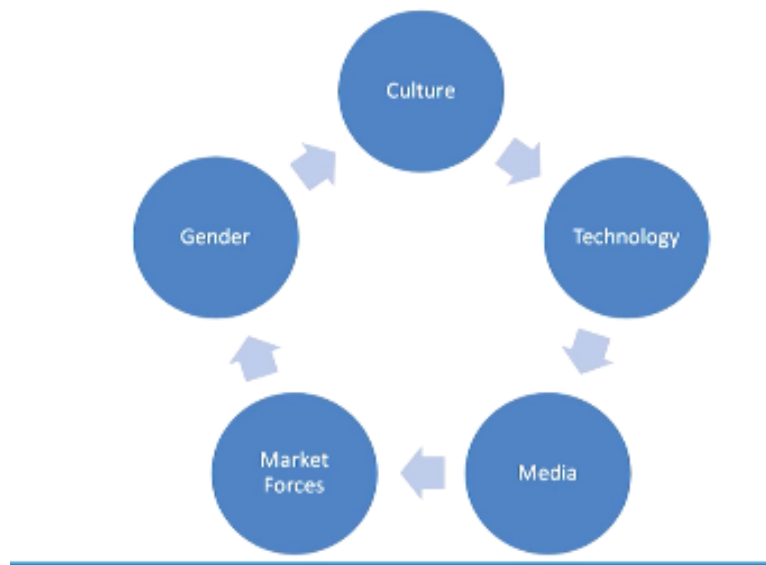


In the 20th century, new interconnections between media and technology created fresh ways of recognising and identifying the world of which one wants to become a part. The individual choice is becoming gradually more important with newer technological interventions, in the development of media forms. We can see that the new technology and technological forms of media and information have radically transformed our experiences in social and cultural aspects and also in the way we perceive the nature of reality.

The continuously growing affordability and wider availability of media particularly after the technology in the context of Internet related social media has fuelled cultural and social changes. We can immediately find out what is happening and also we can let the rest of the world know immediately what we think about that particular event.

So, the immediacy and simultaneity of events and ideas and also of ideas and events has created a remarkable cultural shift. Our understandings of the word culture have also changed and at the same time, we can say that the interconnections between media and culture have become more resilient and more operative also with the passage of time. There is almost a hermeneutic circle which we have to refer to when we talk about either culture or media.

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All these forces which are mentioned here the technology itself its related developments in the field of media, the market forces and how they give a particular shape to media as well as to technology, the issues related with gender, race and ethnicity etc., and how do these collectively shape culture and are also being continually shaped by it, these issues have always generated serious academic and critical thinking.

We can briefly say that the word culture is a multi-layered word and every layer in its interpretation has serious historical contexts, so we find that every layer has its own connotations depending on a particular race, a particular ethnicity, a particular political context, economic class, gender etc.

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- Multi-layered word
- Every layer has contexts
- Raymond Williams
 - Processes of perfection in terms of certain absolute or universal values
 - Documentation function— record of human thought, intellectual and imaginative work, and critical activity
 - Descriptions of a particular way of life – implicit and explicit values, structure of social organizations
- Cultural studies involve multi- and cross- disciplinary ways to look at formal and informal cultural activities



Raymond Williams in the beginning of the 20th century has tried to understand the phenomena of changing interpretations of culture and has said that we basically try to understand this word from three perspectives simultaneously. According to him, the first interpretation is related with the processes of perfection in terms of certain absolute or universal values which mankind strives for.

The secondary purpose according to Raymond Williams is the documentary related purpose, how culture becomes a record of human thought in the ways we intellectually or imaginatively look at different issues and tries to represent them and how does it shape our critical activities in various fields. The third aspect related with culture in the opinion of Raymond Williams was how he describes a particular way of life and how does it explain the implicit and explicit values related with a particular way of life and how does it try to explain the structures of social organisations like family, work, etc.

Cultural studies involve simultaneously, a multi and cross disciplinary method to try to look at the formal and informal cultural activities. And it is with this context that we will try to understand how the changing dimensions of culture have elicited different critical responses from various theorists.

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1960s and 1970s

- USA – Culture Studies assumed a fairly empiricist form like audience surveys etc.
 - Carried out in Departments of Anthropology and Communication Studies
- In UK it became a confluence of interdisciplinary intellectual currents – Sociology + Marxist Political Theory + Structural Semiotics
 - UK – Stuart Hall, Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University
- Focused on analyzing how media “policed” economic crises by portraying the world in a way favorable to those in power
 - Depression crises blamed on international trade and commerce
 - American Dream ideology sells the notion of equality of opportunity to obscure exclusionary practices
 - Failure seen as an individual fault rather than the fault of capitalist system

Perceptions about culture started to change around 1960s and 70s. We have seen how prior to that culture was interpreted in a very different manner. In the USA, we find that cultural studies assumed in empiricist form and they encouraged on audience surveys etc., and cultural studies were being carried on in departments of Anthropology and communication studies mainly instead of being carried out in departments of critical studies.

In United Kingdom, it became a confluence of interdisciplinary intellectual currents. And people who are working in the areas of sociology a structural semiotics and Marxist political theory join together to give a particular shape to what they wanted to understand from this multi-layered phenomena of culture.

In UK, we find that Stuart Hall started a centre for contemporary cultural studies at Birmingham University which very soon became significant centre for these studies. This centre initially wanted to analyse such thing as a media policed economic crisis by portraying the world in a way which is favourable to those in power. For example, how the media studies and media reports on depression always tried to blame the international trade and commerce instead of analysing the limitations of the national level policies, how in the American media, the ‘Dream ideology’ sold the notion of equality of opportunity to obscure the exclusionary practices, and to ensure that people are not attentive to discriminatory racial policies. Failure at the same time was

always portrayed as an individual fault rather than fault of the system particularly according to those working in the area of Marxist political theory, the fault of the capitalist system.

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- How working class youth resisted their assigned social roles through rituals of dress, dance and music that offered a counterpoint to the work routines of modern economic life:
 - Resistant quality of punk, hippies etc.
 - Utopian impulses in mass culture (Frankfurt School)
 - Popular romance novels— *Mills and Boons* and Sidney Sheldon novels—palliative effect on women; encourage them to accept patriarchal structures imposed on their lives
 - Reinforcement of gender conditioning
- Culture overwhelmingly dominates women's lives:
 - Imposes of models of bodily beauty that get constructed as freely chosen options by those victimized by them



People working in the area of cultural studies also started to focus attention on how people from the working classes particularly the youth belonging to the lower economic strata resisted their assigned social role through various rituals of dress, dance or music etc., which offered them an opportunity to resist and think against, dream against the work routines of modern economic life in which they were only a cog.

These cultural studies also highlighted the resistant quality of punk and hippies etc. Philosophers related with Marxism and particularly the Frankfurt School model talked about the delectable utopian impulses in mass culture and how they thought that popular romance novels reinforced gender conditioning among the girls. The popular romance novels written by Sidney Sheldon or Mills and Boons created a palliative effect on women and encourage them to accept patriarchal structures imposed on their lives. They encouraged a daydreaming instead of talking about ways in which these young women could think of changing their life choices.

They also started to focus on how the cultural productions overwhelmingly dominated the lives of women, how gradually media was moving towards the presentation of myths of bodily beauty. So by imposing models of bodily beauty, we find that the options were being constructed for the

women and women were also being victimised by these options which were being pirated by the media as new beauty myths. Here we find that the projection of media is often driven by the market forces.

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Culture, Media and Market Forces

- Foucault suggests that the feeling of free resistance can be a way of more firmly tightening the chains of cultural and social oppression
- Cultural Myths created by media – fairness creams; Barbie doll; Coca-cola; Santa Claus representation, Single's Day in China etc.
- TV and Print media advertising and popular literature/magazines
- Representational codes and techniques shape our perceptions
- Viewers/audience take away meanings which are different from those intended by the producers of TV programs etc
- Audience can decode cultural messages which allow them to think subversively about their lives



It is very pertinent at this point to refer to Foucault who has suggested that the feeling of free resistance can also be a way of more firmly tightening the claims of social and cultural operation, these media theorists emphasise on the creation of various cultural myths and these myths are not related only with the beauty myths which were being paraded by the media even in the middle of the 20th century. For example, the market driven myth of fairness creams and how it becomes a new standard to which women are encouraged to conform to. The market for fairness creams for women was already open by 1980s, but we find that this market in developing countries is being opened for boys by media advertisement at the turn of the 21st century only. How the myths of beauty are being pirated and reconfirmed through cultural products like Barbie doll which became immensely popular among the young girls and how they indirectly encourage them to follow a particular gendered role.

The representation of Santa Claus, the representation of Coca-Cola as a particularly acceptable product also represent these interconnections between media and the market force and how these two together formulate a particular type of culture. A very recent example of this interconnectedness of media and market force is a celebration of single stay in China which is a

very recent affair but very soon it would be a universal affair and would also become a part of our cultural routine.

So, we find that media uses not only the TV or the print but a conglomeration of these to advertise a particular myth. So that gradually it becomes a part of our culture. The representational codes which are being pirated through the media and through various cultural products, shape our perceptions on a permanent footing. At the same time cultural theories suggest that viewers and audience do not necessarily take away the meaning which is desired by the producers in the context of these media advertisements or cultural products.

For example, a young girl playing with a Barbie doll may take up the message that it is better to opt for a gendered role in future but at the same time a young girl can also deduce that this is a limiting role and can decide otherwise. In the adult world also this analogy works and it is possible that viewers and audience take away meanings which are very different from those intended by the producers of TV programs and cultural products.

Audience can also decode cultural messages which allow them to think differently about their lives thereby promoting a particular type of resistance.

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- Culture is hierarchical – like capitalist society
- Culture has a way of distinguishing between positions in the social hierarchy
- The social system tends to reproduce itself through culture, also through systems of social organizations – family, school, place of worship etc.
- Those born into upper class echelons will acquire dispositions that allow them to appreciate certain forms of culture
- And such abilities that help them in securing elevated positions in the social hierarchy
- Working class people will acquire—from their family contexts and schools they attend—cultural dispositions that prepare them for certain lives along the social ladder



In cultural studies, the idea also gained ground that culture is hierarchical and it is a reflection of the capitalist society. Culture also has a way to distinguish between positions in the social hierarchy and it follows the given social hierarchy. The social system as it has developed in our world tends to reproduce itself through culture in direct and indirect ways. It is presented through the cultural products as we have already seen. But it is also seen through systems of social organisations like family, school place of worship etc.

So the social hierarchy in the economic hierarchy which is a part of our social existence also moulds our understanding of culture and encourages us to follow particular cultural values. Those born in upper class echelons will automatically acquire those dispositions which will allow them to appreciate certain forms of culture in their family and school experiences. They would also be encouraged to develop those abilities which would help them in securing elevated positions in social hierarchy. Their immediate organisations of family, school, place of worship, workplace etc., would encourage them to have these values only.

Working class people on the other hand will acquire a different set of value systems from their family and the schools. Their family context and the schools they attend to would encourage those cultural dispositions among the working class people that prepare them for certain lives along the social ladders.

So, culture also works in a hierarchical manner like a capitalist society and the differences and the stratification of a social and economic life have already given a particular shape to our culture which can also be further reinforced by media.

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Approaches to Culture

- We approach culture from two quite incommensurable perspectives:
 - Sees media, TV, film etc. as instruments of domination –economic/gender/ethnic/race – “top down” approach
 - Sees culture from the “bottom up”
- Culture and media as instruments of domination
 - Owned by large corporations and largely run by men;
 - Media and entertainment industry in general cannot help but assist the reproduction of the existing social systems— capitalism, neo-colonialism, and patriarchy
 - By allowing certain kinds of imagery and ideas to gain access to mass audience
 - Suppresses utopian impulses; obliquely limits cultural options



There can also be 2 different approaches to culture, we normally approach culture from two different perspectives which are quite incommensurable. Either we can see culture is a top-down affair or as a bottom-up. We can look at media or TV or film either as instruments of domination in the realms of economic gender, ethnicities and dresses etc., as ‘top down’ or from the bottom up. Culture and media can also become instruments of domination, most of the time we find that large corporations are owned and run by men.

In the same manner, we find that media houses and entertainment agencies and industries are also normally owned and run by men only. And therefore they cannot help but assist the reproduction of the existing social systems in their organisations. Even if it is patriarchal understanding we find that it is the understanding of those men who are at the helm of affairs which would shape the nature of the rest of the organisations.

It is also true in the related realms of our understanding of how capitalism works or how neo-colonialism works in our world, by allowing certain kinds of imagery and ideas to gain access to mass audience, we find that culture can create utopian impulses among the audience and can thereby obliquely limit the cultural options which should have been available to them.

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Bottom up approach

- Pays more attention to the way such forms as music (from African-American spirituals to the blues to rock and roll) express energies and attitudes fundamentally at odds with dominant motifs
- Attitudes and assumptions of the capitalist/patriarchal social order are often disrupted.
 - E.g. deferment of gratification (in order to work better)
- While it can be harnessed in profitable and ultimately socially conservative ways; it also represents the permanent possibility of eruption:
 - of dissonance
 - of an alternative imagination of reality



At the same time, we find that another approach which is commonly termed as the ‘bottom-up’ approach pays more attention to the ways in which music and similar type of other daily cultural experiences help us to express energies and attitudes which are fundamentally at odds with those motives which are dominant in the given culture. Critics have particularly paid attention to music because it is normally directly associated with the felt experience.

And people talk about the African American spiritual to the presence of the blues to the popularity of the rock and roll etc. So, we find that culture comes from below, from these attitudes of the people. So while the attitudes of the people are normally harnessed by the capitalist in patriarchal social order in conservative ways, so that their energy is ultimately result in profitable work as they understand to be. At the same time, we find that this energy can also be related with the possibility of eruption.

So whereas the capitalist and patriarchal social order emphasises on entertainment and related cultural aspects of our daily experiences in a certain way for example, they normally understand the deferment of gratification, a positive value in order that people can become better capable to work. But at the same time we find that this deferment can also be harnessed in such a way that it also keeps inside it a possibility of eruption, a possibility of eruption of dissonance or often alternative imagination of reality.

So culture can be understood from these two perspectives simultaneously. We find that these discussions held this way in the intellectual climate of the mid-20th century. Very soon it is related with different types of media theories also which were developed in the context of the new developments in of media.

In our next module, we would discuss how these changing interpretations of culture also gave rise to certain different type of theories in the context of our understanding of the influence of media and the interconnectedness between media and culture, thank you.