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A New International

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How can cultural studies overcome international boundaries when it is faced with a world that is globalized in its cultural exchanges and hegemonial relationships, yet also fragmented when it comes to its his-stories and her-stories, to its societal structures and economic circumstances? During many discussions on the topic with my fellow students, questions of transnational cooperation, of globalized versus regional cultures, and of different histories and cultural memories quickly came into focus.

In this essay, I want to present a reading of culture which is modelled as a dialogue between top-down and bottom-up processes. This reading presupposes that disruptive political practices can emerge from the popular cultures of disfranchised groups even in the post-imperialist and late-capitalist twenty-first century. Cultural studies can, therefore, help to articulate hope in the face of oppressive and overwhelming hegemonial forces.[1]

However, I do not think that scholars can simply sit back and watch disfranchised groups produce their way out of the impossible conundrum of exploitation, alienation, and appropriation all by themselves. But, I believe that subversive production is still possible in the current global situation – and that it is our responsibility to find and support these dynamics within the vast wastelands of the culture industry.

I
Relocating Subjectivity

While culture is usually considered to be a practice of the people, it is difficult to deny that articulations of subversion have been commodified to a degree that they are now losing most of their disruptive potential between post-irony, "selling-out," the repackaging old ideas, and a lack of utopian imagination.

When, for example, a corporation (not acting out of malice but simply according to the logic dictated to them by the economic framework) uses the rhetorics of

[1] My argument is mostly built around Chantal Mouffe's interpretation of Gramsci as outlined in "Hegemony and Ideology in Gramsci," in *Gramsci and Marxist Theory*, edited by Chantal Mouffe (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1979), 168–204. The idea of elevating "low-brow" culture as a way to subvert hegemonial forces is also informed by Raymond Williams's foundational musings in "Culture is Ordinary," in *The Raymond Williams Reader*, edited by John Higgins (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 10–24.

historical struggles for liberation to sell products produced by taking advantage of international networks of racially coded oppression, there is no anti-racist message in consuming your fair-trade morning coffee. Only a theatre of signs remains. If there is a possible future to be discovered in mass culture, it is hiding better by the year. Any meaningful progress seems to be replaced by its own representation.[2]

In the face of such forces, cultural studies can act as an intellectual counterbalance by actively injecting emancipatory critical discourses into the public conversation. However, in order to rejuvenate the emancipatory practice of resistance against the forces of globalized late-capitalist culture we probably need to rethink the relationship between their dominant structures and Western scholarship. How can we reorient our scholarship in terms of transnational alliances? Where is the connection between the academic and the political? Can we postulate a relationship of becoming, in which academia may, one day, turn into a decisive political force? Or are analysis and activism only horizontally conjoined like an uneasy chimera?

Such considerations boil down to a set of answerable questions: (i) Who are we as practitioners of cultural studies, and what is the object of our studies? (ii) How should we approach the divide between the structures in which we live and work and the structures we write about?

Due to the long tradition of academia's entanglements with economic, social, and racial power structures, cultural studies must face the question whether their fundamental assumptions are still productive tools to think emancipation in the wake of capitalism's commodification of its own disruption and its appropriation of traditional modes of resistance. Seriously revisiting and reinvestigating the old idea of subject-object relations might be a way of understanding the concealed dynamics of subaltern resistance. Rather than as a multitude of isolated objects, we must imagine culture as the product of various subject-object relationships. Such relationships necessarily imply a hierarchy. However, subject and object are not only in a hierarchical relationship; they are also existentially co-dependent. At the same time, it appears impossible to conceive of a relationship whose constituents are not *acting upon each other*. In other words: Objects are always subjects in their own right, and vice versa. This contradiction leads to a deeply embedded struggle at the very core of subject-object relationships.

We can find traces of this struggle all over the history of culture and cultural studies, but its basic structure remains the same: It is always about whether culture (subject) acts upon society (object), or whether society (subject) acts upon culture (object). Both relationships suggest very different potential intervention points for activist scholarship. The first assumption implies that a change of culture must come

[2] These dynamics are captured by slogans such as "greenwashing," "pinkwashing," or "wokewashing." Prominent examples include the critique of Amazon by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) for supposedly standing in solidarity with Black Lives Matter (BLM) movements, while simultaneously profiting from racist face recognition or the US-American National Football League's airing anti-racist commercials after mistreating Colin Kaepernick. On these issues, see "Cool Tweet: Will You Commit to Stop Selling Face Recognition Surveillance Technology That Supercharges Police Abuse?" *ACLU* on *Twitter*, 31 May 2020, web; "Inspire Change | Super Bowl LV Commercial," *NFL* on *YouTube*, 7 February 2021, web.

downwards from a position of power – whether intellectually, for example in the form of academic intervention, or by capitalist brute-forcing, or by the sometimes violent imposition of ideology. The second assumption implies a bottom-up-process, levelling the playing field and putting academia in a supportive, rather than in a prescriptive position.

A method to relocate the position of cultural studies within cultural subject/object-relations is to analyse them with the help of key texts from cultural studies. In the next section, I will read Adorno's culture industry thesis in dialogue with Roland Barthes's concept of mythology while focusing on the question of political agency. From the results, I will derive a set of co-ordinates to locate cultural studies in relation to cultural production and chart a possible route bridging the divide between scholarship and political practice in an attempt to disentangle cultural studies from the structural boundaries of national power structures.

II
Rediscovering Subversiveness

Adorno's and Horkheimer's idea of the culture industry reaffirms a top-down process in which cultural production, controlled by a small group of powerful actants, is acting upon society. It might not be a perfectly fitting description for the flattened cultural terrain of the twenty-first century, but it serves as a productive starting point to reframe "high" and "low" culture as "top-down" and "bottom-up" processes. Adorno wrote in 1963:

> [The culture industry] refers to the standardization of the thing itself – such as that of the Western, familiar to every movie-goer – and to the rationalization of distribution techniques, but not strictly to the production process. […] It is industrial more in a sociological sense, in the incorporation of industrial forms of organization even where nothing is manufactured – as in the rationalization of office work – rather than in the sense of anything […] produced by technological rationality.[3]

While a film can be created by a diverse group of workers and artists, by "supposedly great personalities," as Adorno puts it, the product is nevertheless "standardized." Due to the division of labour and the structure of Western mass-cultural production, the artist's individuality can be used by those "who control [the culture industry]" to "reinforce ideology," in so far as it is possible to maintain the illusion that "the completely reified and mediated is a sanctuary from immediacy and life." The result is a mode of production that is "industrial […] in a sociological sense."[4] This means, that, even if the work is structurally not part of a material cycle of resource exploitation and physical production ("nothing is manufactured"), the product – in this case culture – is still governed and flattened by the ideological

[3] Theodor Adorno, "Culture Industry Reconsidered," *New German Critique* 6 (1975): 14.
[4] Ibid.

hegemony of "those in power." Mass culture as a point of resistance becomes impossible; modernity has succeeded in ingesting almost all facets of everyday life.

This argument is, however, a product of a specific reading. It places the abundance of agency on the industrialized production of culture. New points for intervention emerge when we reframe mass culture as something that can be subjected to the influence of subversive ideological structures. But we must do this in a way that is materially solid enough to become a relevant subject for our studies, politically potent enough to be used for activist practice, and transnational enough to warrant an integration into our reframed practice of cultural studies.

Compared to Adorno's and Horkheimer's writings, Barthes's *Mythologies* (1957) offers us a far less rigid and thus a useful framework when talking about cultural production as a product of active reception. Due to Barthes's quasi-linguistic method of deconstructing culture down to its semantic bones, his method can also be used empirically.

In *Mythologies*, "The Face of Garbo" is among the most interesting essays to put into conversation with the culture industry thesis. Barthes looks at a similar object (the movies), only through slightly different lenses. He is not thinking about the sociologically industrial production of cultural imaginations. Refusing to frame the "Face of Garbo" as a bourgeois production, he utilizes images of antiquity and aristocracy by alluding to figures of the essential and metaphors derived from older cultural tropes:

> Garbo's face represents this fragile moment when the cinema is about to draw an existential from an essential beauty, when the archetype leans towards the fascination of mortal faces, when the clarity of the flesh as essence yields its place to a lyricism of Woman.[5]

One can read this as anything from poetic to tasteless and even downright creepy, but the passage relates in interesting ways to the question of cultural production when put into conversation with Adorno.[6]

In "Culture Industry Reconsidered," Adorno postulates the idea of a culture that is only superficially related to history. Barthes, on the other hand, conceptualizes "femininity" (typologized as "fragile" and "lyrical") and "beauty" (linking it to the fragility/woman-complex in the tradition of William Shakespeare and Edgar Allan Poe) as essences which are deeply rooted within culture. Sure, the archetypical "woman" would not look like Greta Garbo (or Ophelia, or Annabel Lee) in many regions of the globe, but the flexibility of the Barthesian framework allows for extended readings. Compared to Adorno, who places cultural agency on a small group of people as opposed to "the masses," Barthes places the agency of reading "the

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[5] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, translated by Richard Howard and Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012), 57.

[6] This paper is not intended to discuss Roland Barthes's relationship with women. But I still feel like I should interject here, stating that any description of a woman that is at the same time objectifying (both as a poem and as a fleshy crop), alluding to mortality and death at several places (fragile, mortal, flesh), and seemingly hopelessly enamored, all within fewer than fifty words, should be read from a healthy distance.

essential" in Garbo's face into the hands of the people who watch her on the big screen. By doing so, he strengthens the power of cultural memory over the producer's material capital.

Despite these differences, however, I cannot help but feel that "The Face of Garbo" and "Culture Industry Reconsidered" embody two sides of the same coin. Readings of culture from top-down and bottom-up must coexist to acknowledge the realities of production and the power of the recipient alike. Cultural studies must emancipate itself from adversarial thinking: Instead of pitting Barthes against Adorno, they must think Adorno and Barthes in conversation. Culture acts upon society (since Adorno's industrial forces are still at play), *and* society acts upon culture at the moments of reception and remembering. Society can use memories and mythologies more deeply embedded into culture than industrialized production could ever hope to be; it reaffirms its status as an actant by demanding that producers of culture to adhere to their own prepackaged promises.

III
Reframing Cultural Studies

We can utilize this reframing of subject-object-relations even further to rethink cultural dynamics beyond the subversion of mass-culture within the Western framework of Barthes. The global hierarchies are still "top" versus "bottom" and "industry" versus "mythology," but the questions of "What is top?" and "What is bottom?" become pertinent facing a structure that is still crafted by twentieth century-style cultural cannibalism. What is the late-capitalist empire, if not – sufficiently deconstructed – whatever is placed by cultural studies on the supposedly "top" end of the scale? If we use such a process without acknowledging the possibility of bottom-up subversion, ignoring the Barthesian side of the coin, we risk overlooking bottom-up processes that have reshaped the international cultural landscape.

A valuation of "top" and "bottom" has traditionally served as a gatekeeping process by which certain types of culture have been, voluntarily or not, kept out of the academic discourse. While Western lowbrow and pulp cultures and their potentials of subversion have found their way into the Western cultural canon within the twentieth century, subaltern cultural practices are still pushed to the fringes of public consciousness simply due to their positioning within globalized power structures.[7] Rediscovering the traces of resistance (i.e., the subjectivity of the subjected/objectivized subject, as it were) within globalized cultural structures is an important and urgent task for twenty-first century scholarship.

Of course, the purely Barthesian approach has its limits. While a strengthening of the subaltern mythological perspective is useful, there is still the matter of

[7] This is, after all, what subaltern studies argued against. For an important overview of these discussions, see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999).

economic materiality and, thus, of the limits of subversion. The infrastructures which are used for active readings, conversations, and reception are inherently linked to the systems that need to be disrupted. Meta and Twitter are participants in a transnational system of data-commodification and overreaching private ownership. English is the *lingua franca* of international cultural exchange. The material cost of cultural production, the high level of competition in an international network, and a slant towards national bubbles with their own social networks (for instance, Weibo in China or vKontakte/VK.ru in Russia) further this divide. And, as usual, the lines of exclusion often intersect with the still lingering borders of colonialism. When was the last time some truly disruptive cultural production from the Global South went viral on social media in the Global North? Hierarchy is also a product of opportunity. Furthermore, often enough, the culture industry imposes its structures so thoroughly that the result can read like a bottom-up process without being one. This can occur by co-opting "subaltern" cultural resources and memories, while simultaneously displacing their creators from the only spaces where they could possibly be heard.[8]

It is an established gesture within our academic field to note the need for including and amplifying marginalized voices. But it is also important to be aware of existing structures of power from social-media platforms to trans-national late-capitalist and postcolonial structures. In the past, even academia has used its hegemonial force to retell and reframe stories according to its own interest.[9] While this has arguably become much better since the late twentieth century, it illustrates the importance of cultural studies' positioning in relation to cultural structures.

Yet, despite being aware of the limits of bottom-up processes, we should also always remember that the dynamics of reappropriation and capitalist commodification are not the end of everything we hold dear in cultural production. Our culture is indeed subject to constant attempts of top-down industrial production and appropriation, but cultural reception is still a field which is at least partially shaped by the individual subject. Our agency is not absolute, but agential power has not been eliminated altogether. Being aware of this encouraging fact is of the utmost importance. Only a culture that acknowledges the possibility for change can harness its potential.

This depends on reacknowledging the idea of different levels of culture; levels that are not separated by notions of "high" versus "low," or of "canon" versus "mass culture," but rather through awareness of opportunity, material means, and hegemonial interests within a transnational framework. Such an acknowledgement can

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[8] Retellings of Native-American histories are a common strategy in parts of the Black Metal scene. White American actors pose as Native Americans to insinuate a "deeper connection to nature" and the image of the "noble savage." An especially problematic example is Finian "Appalachian Wolf" Patraic, of the supposedly "Native" Canadian project "Ifernach," which at some point also included members of the right-wing nationalist band "Brume d'Autonome." See "Ifernach" profile on *Metal Archives*, 20 September 2022, web.

[9] This problem has been illustrated by Edward W. Said in *Orientalism* (1978). As he influentially argues, European scholars created an entire pseudo-scientific subject to construct a romantic narrative of the supposed "Orient." See *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003), 1–28.

be theoretically grounded by critical theory. Every subversive trace that a subaltern agent can leave within culture is inflected by the structural reality in which it was created. Furthermore, a recipient can demand the fulfilment of a promise only in so far as the promise was articulated. Consequently, subject-object-relations in cultural production are multidirectional: Culture acts on society, which acts on culture in an infinite struggle for hegemony.

On the other hand, a strengthening of the recipient's agency against dominant power structures implies the scholar's agency (and therefore their responsibility) as well. We must not shy away from acknowledging and acting against our own entanglements with capitalist, political, and social structures by forming new alliances, strengthening international partnerships, and supporting transnational efforts by demanding the further financing of infrastructure for continuous exchange beyond national and political borders. In our everyday academic practice, we must criticize the dominant frameworks and structures of cultural production – for example by using Adorno's framework – but also by integrating a reading of bottom-up processes, using methods such as Barthes's mythologies to uncover and emphasise the traces of subaltern subversive practices.

A fundamental academic restructuring and rethinking can only work on an international basis. Both aspects of the New International – demanding the financing of international frameworks and using a synthesis of critical and emancipatory readings – only work in an international alliance based on equal footing, continuous exchange, and productive rereadings of cultural studies' touchstone texts. But, most importantly, we must be aware of our own agency. Change can only happen when one acknowledges the ability for change, for our theoretical frameworks shape our realities – and in which way, that is up to us.