Handout: Culture & Representation

1. Positions in the Discourse on Culture from the 19th Century to the Present Day:
From a Normative to a Descriptive Perspective

Theory / Dates	Representatives	Key Concepts and Questions	Wider Social Issues	
Culture with capital "C" 1860s -1880s	Matthew Arnold	Culture as a way to perfect/improve the populace; culture vs. anarchy	Perceived decline of contemporary life, Culture as a stabilizing force in society, a remedy	Normative Approaches
Frankfurt School Since 1920	Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Jürgen Habermas	Critical theory; critique of mass culture (as anti-enlightening) and capitalism;	Mass culture, capitalism, culture industry, cultural imperialism	
High and Low Culture 1930s	F.R. Leavis, T.S. Eliot	Elite culture; aesthetic quality; judgments on value, beauty, form; high culture vs. mass culture as low culture	Mass culture vs. high culture	
1950-1960s First wave British Cultural Studies	Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, Edward P. Thompson,	culture of ordinary people; working class culture (Hoggart); mass culture = *a whole way of life*, *structures of feeling* (Williams)	Tensions btw. old UK working class culture and new mass-produced culture from USA;	
The Cultural Turn				
Second wave of British Cultural Studies (Birmingham School); 1963/1964-2000s;	**Stuart Hall**, Lawrence Grossberg, John Fiske	**the construction of reality through representation**; **identity formation in constellations of power**; focus on media culture, popular culture	Intellectual upheaval across Europe, increasing class differences in UK	Descriptive Approaches
Cultural Semiotics/Cultural, Material and Social Anthropology 1970s-	Charles S. Peirce, Ernst Cassirer, **Clifford Geertz**	Culture as a readable text, as a **"system of inherited concepts expressed in symbolic forms"** as well as a **"control mechanism"** (Geertz)	Increasing dissemination and significance of popular culture, increased globalization	

Descriptive approaches in the field of Cultural Studies draw upon an understanding of 'culture' as "a system of inherited conceptions expressed in **symbolic forms** by which [humans] communicate, perpetuate, and develop their **knowledge about and attitudes toward life**" (Geertz 89).

At the same time, "culture is best seen not [only] as complexes of concrete behavior patterns—customs, usages, traditions, habit clusters—as has, by and large, been the case up to now, but [also] as a set of control mechanisms—plans, recipes, rules, instructions (what computer engineers call "programs")—for the governing of behavior [through **symbolic forms**]" (Geertz 44).

2. The Analysis of Representations

Cultural Studies-oriented Literary Studies draws on specific concepts and tools to 'access' culture through **an analysis of symbolic forms**. In this context, symbolic forms include e.g. **poems, plays, paintings, films, television series, graphic novels, popular songs, …**

Each type of material employs **specific techniques of representation,** i.e. it uses a different 'language' (verbal, visual, audiovisual …) as a "system of representation" (Hall 3).

Questions for analysing representations:
- **What** is being represented, i.e. what is the object of representation (e.g. a concrete or an abstract thing, an action, an attitude, etc.)? What concepts and interpretations (of the represented object) are to be found in the material that we perceive?
- **How** is it represented, i.e. which techniques of representation are used and what is the specific mediality and materiality of the symbolic form in which the representation occurs (e.g. narrative techniques and focalisation in narrative texts, images and figures of speech in various types of text, etc.)?
- **In what context** is the representation embedded, i.e. in which cultural, historical, socio-political environment is it produced and becomes productive itself?

3. The Construction of Reality through Representations

We analyse representations as culturally *produced* and culturally *productive* (cf. Montrose): **Representations are not only formed by their specific socio-historical environment, but contribute to forming it at the very same time**. In other words:

- Our "knowledge about and attitudes toward life" (Geertz) are produced through symbolic forms: What we perceive as 'reality,' how we conceive of ourselves and of others etc. are products of forms and practices of representation and thus – in as much as these forms and practices themselves – subject to constant change.
- Accordingly, the specific way in which reality is formed through representations is inflected by a) the *genre* and the *medium* in which they appear, and b) by the specific historical and cultural/regional contexts: Reality is *constructed differently* in a Shakespearean play than, say, in a 19th century US-American novel, or an episode of a 1990s Australian TV series. Or vice versa: The sonnet may construct *a different reality* than the novel, the TV series or the action movie.
- Specific representations thus contribute to producing (our knowledge of) the world, our 'identities,' and our scope of action. Representations are not just reflections of reality, they actively – and powerfully – are part of the formation and transformation of reality.

Sources

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