Theories of Mass Culture

Sociology of Popular Culture, Week 2

2/4 - 2/8 - Prof. Liu / UMass Boston / Spring 2013
Mass culture

- Mass production: Fordism
- Mass consumption
- Mechanical reproduction
- “The masses”
- Mass media
Georg Simmel

• Culture is “the cultivation of individuals through the agency of external forms which have been objectified in the course of history.”

• The Metropolis and Mental Life” (1903)

• Traditional rural/small town: emotional, subjective relationships, steady customs

• Modern urban/metropolitan centers: rational, objective relationships, constant change, money economy
Objective culture

- Money economy reduces quality and individuality of things to quantitative value (exchange value)
- Punctuality, calculation, exactitude --> intellectual relationships
- Large crowds --> emotional distance
- Rapid stimuli, change --> blasé outlook
The individual and objective culture

- Individual becomes single cog in vast structure of forces
- Loneliness, alienation
- Struggle to assert individuality, distinctness
- Freedom from small town social bonds, traditions, conformity
Modern Times (1936)

- Chaplin’s most popular film
- Commentary on modern, industrialized culture, Great Depression
- Assembly line work
- Slapstick comedy
Cinema as popular culture

✦ Affordable entertainment

✦ Films do not directly reflect objective culture, mass production

✦ Escapism

✦ Expressive of utopian desires: need for different, better social order (Richard Dyer, “Entertainment and Utopia”)

Wednesday, February 6, 13
Modern Times

- State of workers’ rights (lack of)
- Prison system
- Dehumanization in factory assembly line work
- Struggle to survive, poverty, Great Depression
- Increased efficiency, productivity is driving goal of factory owner, to the detriment of workers.
- American Dream of couple in their own house
“A Theory of Mass Culture” (1953)

- Dwight Macdonald (1906-1982)
- “Kitsch” (German word for mass culture)
- Related to but different from high culture and folk art
- Historical reasons: political democracy, popular education, technological development
High culture

Avant-garde artists, intellectuals

Folk art/culture

Common people

Elites

Mass culture

The masses
Mass culture - Dwight Macdonald

- Made by elites and ruling classes for the masses
- Purpose: profit and maintenance of class rule
- Operative in capitalist and communist societies (U.S. and U.S.S.R.)
- Capitalism: entertainment
- Communism: pedagogy
Gresham’s Law

• Bad drives out good

• Kitsch competes with good art

• Kitsch is more easily understood, accessed, appeals to “lowest common denominator”-->ease of consumption

• Kitsch is standardized, large quantities-->ease of production

• Kitsch “predigests art for the spectators and spares him the effort” (Clement Greenberg).
Homogenized culture

- Dissolves distinctions of class, tradition, taste, value judgments, cultures
- Metaphor: homogenized milk
- Democratic and non-discriminatory
- Ex) *Life* Magazine
Avant-garde

- Intellectual and artistic elite
- Tied to cultural and political radicalism (1890-1930)
- Removed from mass culture
- Ahead of the people
- Ex) Picasso, Joyce, Stravinsky
Art and cinema

- Macdonald: Chaplin’s films are folk art
- Silent cinema: some examples of folk art and avant-garde
- Directors as artists: D.W. Griffith
- Sound film: rise of formulas
- Division of labor, technicians and specialists
The problem of the masses

- Conservatives: rebuild traditional class barriers between elites and common people; popular is cheap and vulgar.

- Liberals and radicals: masses are duped by makers of kitsch, common people are “noble savages,” need better cultural products.

- Macdonald: both views are wrong-->mass culture is not expression of the people but of the masses
Macdonald: the masses

- People in the masses do not relate to each other as individuals, members of a community

- Abstract, distant, nonhuman relations

- “Folk” and community: shared interests, each individual matters and integrated into group

- Mass society: large quantities, undifferentiated and loosely structured, cohere along least common denominator

- The public
Future of high culture: dark

- Blurring of class lines, unstable cultural traditions, increased facilities for making kitsch
- Decline of avant-garde
- Fragmented intelligentsia
- “Brain workers” are specialists
Future of mass culture: darker

* Trivial and comfortable products
* Lower audience expectations
* Chicken or the egg question: mass product or audience?
* Formulaic: popular music and Hollywood films
* Folk art lacks cultural roots and intellectual toughness