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Studies in Culture and Society Group (GRECS)

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Abstract

This article describes research by the Grup d'Estudis en Cultura i Societat (Studies in Culture and Society Group, GRECS) into the links between culture and society. Firstly, we explain why we at GRECS attach so much importance to the fact that, in modern capitalist society, market forces and communication media and technologies condition our attempts to make sense of the world and our place in it. Secondly, we describe our three intertwined lines of research: critical analysis of cultural and artistic production; the overlap between emotions and experiences in contemporary culture; and the links between culture and social inequalities. Finally, we describe the research carried out to date and the activities undertaken to achieve our aims.

Keywords

culture, emotions, inequalities, technology, culture industry, consumption

Grup d'Estudis en Cultura i Societat (GRECS)

Resum

Aquest article explica l'aproximació al lligam entre cultura i societat que es treballa des del grup de recerca GRECS (Grup d'Estudis en Cultura i Societat). En primer lloc, es justifica per què donem importància a com els materials proporcionats pel mercat, els mitjans i les tecnologies de la comunicació condicionen el nostre esforç per donar sentit al món i al lloc que hi ocupem en la societat capitalista moderna. En segon lloc, explicitem les tres grans línies de recerca, entrellaçades però amb objectius diferenciats: la línia que se centra en l'anàlisi crítica de la producció cultural i artística; la línia que s'interessa en la conjunció entre emocions i experiència en la cultura contemporània, i la línia que estudia l'articulació entre diferències culturals i desigualtats socials. En tercer lloc, finalment, expliquem en quines recerques i funcionament es materialitzen aquests objectius.

Paraules clau

cultura, emocions, desigualtats, tecnologia, indústria cultural, consum

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Culture in modern capitalist society cannot be understood without considering the exponential increase in cultural productions and symbolic forms —which 'cultivate' us— which, in our struggle to survive, make sense of the world and our place in it. An enormous proportion of these objectified forms and cultural productions are supplied by the market in the form not only of films, songs and books, but also cars, computers, bars, football, furniture, holidays, clothes, etc. They 'bring us together' and we also communicate through them with the crucial mediation of technologies that enable us not only to objectify meanings, but also to transmit

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meanings beyond the here-and-now of face-to-face relations. Previously culture was paintings, the printed press, cinema, photography, the telephone and television; now it is also the internet, mobile devices and digital technologies in general.

Since Marx, Simmel, Adorno and Williams wrote about culture and its relationship with capitalist society, the cultural production and social construction process, as based on meaning and symbolic forms, has changed. If it is indeed true that we make sense of the world, our place in it and ourselves in how we relate and come together and in how we produce, distribute and consume culture, then the fact is that we have developed, in recent decades, into a cultural consumption society. This society, in which cultural hierarchies have become extremely complex, produces ever greater quantities and a growing diversity of cultural objects. Furthermore, consumer goods and the communication media in the capitalist context convert our emotions, desires and behaviour —and even we ourselves— into cultural objects.

Leaving aside technological change and the evolution in consumption, successive generations born and brought up in contemporary popular forms of culture have generated their own culture —think, for example, of deepening cynicism, ironic twists, the cult of and crisis in authenticity, differentiation and transgression through consumption and reiterated fashion cycles. Such developments represent an important challenge when considering the ties between culture and society.

The very words *culture* and *society*, remember, are relatively new and simultaneously mean both a great deal and very little. It is not only that we use them to say very different things depending on the context; they also help us think —even if we are not aware of this— about the great questions of our time. More than fifty years have passed since Raymond Williams, in his acclaimed *Culture and Society* (1958), argued that the concepts of *culture* and *society* were interwoven from the 18th to the 20th centuries and that the way we think about culture is continuously shaped and reshaped. *Society* used to be understood simply as "companionship or fellowship" and *culture* was "husbandry, the tending of natural growth." The two concepts nowadays have a multitude of meanings and uses, given that, in the last three centuries, many thinkers have used them in relation to major issues such as industrialisation, democratisation, social inequalities and also the differences between nations, between so-called 'civilised' and 'primitive' nations, between east and west and between church and state, and what is excluded from both. When we refer, often unthinkingly, to culture and society, we are, in fact, marshalling the many challenges posed by these concepts as, with great naturalness, we interweave the general, the personal and the private.

Thus, society has come to be differentiated from the state, which, in turn, emerged to mark a difference with the church. And culture has developed into something in opposition to and distant from nature; depending on the interpretation, it may refer to human formation, the general intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development of an individual or society, the general body of the arts or, in the broadest sense, the specific lifestyle of a people, period, group or humanity in general. The ambiguity regarding the two terms makes it clear that they are not static concepts; rather, they are dynamic, they constantly evolve and they are renewed by social historical developments and by the productions and forms of power existing at any given moment in time. In the context of the current changes referred to above, the Culture and Society Study Group at the UOC (GRECS) critically studies changes in the relationship between culture and society from three distinct but interrelated perspectives: (1) cultural and artistic production; (2) emotions and experiences in culture; and (3) cultural differences and social inequalities. The debate and tensions regarding these three perspectives and the group's exchanges and efforts are proving a very fertile ground for cross-fertilisation between a range of issues, traditions and approaches.

Critical analysis of cultural and artistic production

The first of the perspectives on the relationship between culture and society refers to cultural and artistic production, which we analyse adopting a critical and historical —but simultaneously contemporary— stance, with a view to highlighting the tensions existing between the different fields involved. One of our departure points is to explore the way artistic practices shape and contribute content to culture and society as depositories of social subjectification processes and as active agents of the cultural transformations in progress at a given moment in time.

Growing cultural globalisation and the widespread use of the information and communication technologies in social life and, in particular, in culture and the arts, have generated practices and discourses that reveal profound ontological, political, aesthetic and economic transformations. We analyse such practices and discourses in relation to cultural and artistic productions (and the historical processes in which they occur), namely, the emergence of new forms of social organisation (social networks, collective creation, etc), economic and political transformations (new musical production and distribution models, etc) and the emergence of the new technosciences (digital arts, bio-art, etc).

Our approach to the study of artistic and cultural practices is, in many interwoven strata, to conduct an analysis that departs from a specific analysis of production materials and techniques (film, video and digital), explores the discourses of the different agents involved (artists, curators, critics, institutions, theoreticians and spectators) and, finally, focuses on more general areas intervened in by structures and substrates affected by the different practices (the market, cultural politics, etc).

This research is pursued from the (inter)disciplinary fields of history, art and culture theory, sociology and the philosophy

of culture; in our endeavour to uncover constituent power relations in artistic and cultural productions we also draw on a range of theoretical approaches: the social history of art, critical theory and political economics of culture (Terranova), current transformations in post-structuralism (Delanda) and social studies of science and technology (Latour). For example, our studies of the transformations occurring in the warp and weft of relationships between art, science, technology and society, show these to be vehicles for profound structural changes in culture (the immaterial obsolescence of digital art or the obsolescent materiality of bio-art). We also explore how, in the fields of modern art and film, the bases for contestatory practices are historically constituted along with their instituting and instituted processes, how subversive discourses and spaces are generated and what relationships are established with the surrounding hegemonic framework.

We draw on different historical and theoretical approaches that shape and constantly reshape a field of analysis in which, thanks to historic materialism, certain historians of the late 1940s and the 1950s became interested in resolving what Bourdieu called *the state of exception* of works of art: an artistic autonomy that profoundly affected a discipline based on a positivist account of a succession of styles and works and the isolated figure of the creative genius (leaving aside certain cases in the 19th century). We are interested in overcoming this state of exception, which posits that any artistic or cultural artefact reflects complex power relations, approaching, from other more philosophical positions, what is called *the new materialism*.

Emotions and experiences in culture

Our second approach to exploring the links between culture and society is through the sociology of the emotions, exploring how the emotions and feelings shape modern subjectivities. This process, reminiscent of the Enlightenment, has, in the last century, converted the emotions —and particularly love— into entities that can be easily evaluated, quantified and, indeed, commercialised, due to the interweaving of the languages of the self and the market. Commercialisation has undoubtedly been fostered by the development of public and private spaces in liberal democracies. We do not overlook the political dimension of the inner life and the emotions or how technology expresses corporality and emotions, since they interweave and converge in the social and cultural world. We aim to reflect these connections in the perspective adopted by us regarding emotions and experiences in culture.

This perspective views the emotions not as purely individual and/or genetic, but as cultural and social products. While not underestimating the individual component of the emotions, we focus on the social and cultural contexts in which emotions are experienced, expressed and given meaning. We emphasise the normative function of the emotions as dictating behaviour patterns

and the socialisation process and social life in general. We see, for example, how key adults play an important role in 'helping' small children to identify and name their emotions and to react, to specific emotions and situations, in ways that are socially defined as expected and correct; how shame plays an important regulatory role in mobile phone photograph and video use; and how discourses on love are present in the way we relate to a partner or write e-mails of love.

Our approach to the sociology of the emotions is closely linked to discourse analysis regarding the emotions. First of all, we are interested in analysing conceptual maps of the different emotions and their interrelationships in society at a specific point in time (for example, what is shame, what is love, what is hate and how do we feel and show gratitude). Secondly, we are interested in analysing and comparing the historical evolution of these conceptual maps and the norms associated with the expression of, and explanation for, each emotion. The historical perspective cannot be overlooked in the research that we plan to do. Hence, we pay particular attention to what Norbert Ellis referred to as *the civilisation of the emotions* —although we choose not to adopt a linear and evolutionary perspective on history.

The approach we propose is linked to the sociology of Simmel and Halbwachs, to the analysis of the discourse of Foucault and, above all, to recent developments in the field of the sociology of the emotions and works by Illouz, Turner, Giddens and Flam. Nonetheless, much is owed to efforts, by authors such as Hochschild, Scheff, Kemper and Collins in the 1970s and 1980s, to systematise the study of emotions from the perspective of sociology.

Within the broad spectrum of emotions, we are currently focusing on analysing love relationships and the emotions inspired by love. We could, in fact, table a discussion as to whether love in itself is an emotion. We choose to define it as a form of social relationship —indeed, the dominant form of social linkage— associated with a whole range of higher emotions at the discourse, practice and experience levels. Love is not so much an emotion *sui generis*; it is, rather, a cocktail of emotions, in which, at different times, some emotions play a greater role than others and where the specific weights of the ingredients vary (or new ingredients are added).

Cultural differences and social inequalities

Our final perspective on the relationship between culture and society concerns the link between social inequalities and culture and, above all, the idea that this link has 'become fluid' as a consequence of the great changes brought about by the culture of consumption and the media. According to some, this fluidity is real, and for others, it only occurs at the level of the conscience. Put another way, we could say that, according to the first group

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(often simplistically labelled 'postmodernists'), it makes no sense nowadays to say that social position conditions cultural practices and consumptions because people from many different origins consume the same cultural productions and people of the same origins choose to consume very different cultural productions. According to the second group, the apparent fluidity is merely a false perception (an 'epistemological fallacy'), a product of an experience of the world that renders social differences invisible but does not remove or erode them.

We aim to throw some light on this debate. In studying popular culture, a frequently simplistic view of the link between culture and society predominates, which, while it reflects the differences associated with gender, sexuality and ethnicity, fails to attach sufficient importance to socioeconomic inequalities, treated as peripheral in recent times. Our empirical research demonstrates how differences continue to exist —for all that they are less obvious. For this reason, a more sophisticated conceptual approach is required that interleaves with a whole series of new approaches to studying social structure (by authors such as Devine, Skeggs, Bennett and Atkinson); these call for doing away with the distinction between material inequalities and the cultural factors associated with advantage. Differentiation on the basis of 'toughness' or 'intellect', labels such as 'posh', 'vulgar' or 'immigrant' and distinctions along the lines of 'them' and 'us' are all powerful social markers that structure our social geography. Understanding how this process unfolds and how it links with gender and sexuality differences and ethnic, national and linguistic identities is key to advancing the debate on culture and society.

To do that, we focus on three key aspects in particular. First of all, we explore how the search for authenticity or what is 'cool' modifies and adds complexity to the links between culture and social inequality. The distinctions associated with authenticity and with 'cool' shape interesting new links between culture and social inequality, such as the differentiation (or otherwise) between 'arty' and 'politicized' drawn by those belonging to 'tough' and 'street' cultures and between other labels associated with the latest in consumerist fashion. Each of these differences reflects class position and the mirroring between class positions in different ways.

Secondly, we examine how the main norms that guide individuals in regard to work ethics, consumption and authenticity intermediate between social status and forms of cultural consumption. It is crucial to understand how an individual or group resolves tensions at the practical, rhetorical and discursive levels between these three areas (regarding what is done and not done and regarding what is said and what is intended to be done or not done).

Last of all, we are interested in exploring inequalities in cultural practices and consumption. We depart from the position that it is impossible to understand inequalities associated with class, gender, sexuality and national, ethnic and linguistic origin or identity in isolation, because, when a practice is judged, expressions of

dignity and recognition related to all these elements converge. It is not just a matter of ethnifying social class, more how we consider gender and sexuality to be inseparable from class and from national, ethnic and linguistic identities.

GRECS production

Cross-fertilisation between these three perspectives has generated a very fertile ground for our critical exploration of changes in the link between culture and society. The debate and the creative tensions generated by sharing different theoretical and disciplinary perspectives, bibliographical baggage, thematic orientations and empirical materials all enrich different approaches to studying how the consumption culture and technological change modify the relationship between culture and society in the context of modern capitalism. These productive exchanges are channelled in two ways.

First, in a fortnightly seminar, we share and discuss our knowledge and interests. Informed by disciplines and traditions such as sociology, anthropology, philosophy, communication studies, cultural studies, history, art and culture theory and studies of science, technology and society, we discuss our readings of past and current research. The empirical and theoretical studies that we share include research into uses of YouTube; violence in digital videos; publicity, what we call the 'three spirits of modernity'; musical taste as a cultural production; youth socialisation groups and street culture; social construction of taste and style in youth socialisation groups; social inclusion and exclusion of young people, with or without experience of migration; interrelationships between art, science, technology and society; social and cultural transformations linked to mobile telephones; and participation, cultural consumption and linguistic habits among young Catalans.

Other research underway and feeding the efforts of the group as a whole takes the form of doctoral dissertations and other specific projects that explore themes such as technological mediation of the musical tastes of young people; family socialisation in new technologies; celebrities in social networks; subversive processes in art and film; love in the time of bits; electrodance as a form of communication; physical and virtual relational spaces in the creation of youth identities and the role of social inequality; and the commercialisation of digital art.

Secondly, we draw together the different threads in the group's research in the form of the R&D project titled *Forms of partner commitment and the expression of emotions in the electronic communication age* (2011-2013), referring to emotions and experiences in contemporary culture, cultural and artistic productions and also the links between cultural differences and social inequalities. The aim is to explore how new practices and renewed discourses on love and the emotions affect the daily lives of couples, popular culture and horizons are taken for granted,

thereby developing new interpretative frameworks for thinking, acting and experimenting. We believe that we are currently facing profound changes that will modify experiences, how we love and the associated emotions. In fact, our experiences, our emotions and our experiences of emotions cannot be disassociated from the place and time we live in and the conditions in which we are socialised. We have to learn how to fall in love, how to feel shame or compassion. Human experiences without the social forms that make sense of them are not possible —except as chaos. We thus focus on specific social relationships and endeavour to understand horizons for interpretation and meaning, new meanings and affective experiences, in particular, love experiences.

Researchers in GRECS explore how, in our struggle to survive, we make sense of the world and our place in it in the context of a constantly changing modern capitalist society, with information and communication technologies and material objects provided by the market.

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Studies in Culture and Society Group (GRECS)
A research group recognised as emerging by the Catalan government
http://culturaisocietat.wordpress.com/

The group is coordinated by the researcher Roger Martínez and made up of the lecturers Pau Alsina, Natàlia Cantó, Isaac Gonzàlez, Francesc Núñez and Ana Rodríguez from the UOC's Arts and Humanities Department. They work in close collaboration with the researchers Ricard Benito, Toni Cambra, Irene Cussó, Miquel Fernàndez, Nadia Hakim, Eduard Minobis, Alexis Rodríguez, Swen Seebach and Pau Waelder.

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