

MA in Cultural Astronomy and Astrology
Introduction to Cultural Astronomy and Astrology
Culture and Cultural Astronomy
Week Description
Nick Campion

The class addresses the contested but crucial concept of culture, drawing on Terry Eagleton's discussion, asking, 'what is culture?', 'what is *not* cultural?', and why does it matter? This investigation can then lead into the specific field of cultural astronomy in a similar way, for example, 'what kind of astronomy is cultural? What (if any) is not? And what is the relationship between cultural astronomy and astrology as subjects?

We will also consider what is meant by the term 'Cultural Astronomy'. Is it an academic discipline? Or a subject area, drawing on different disciplines? Or is it the practices and beliefs that a culture holds about the sky? I have defined Cultural Astronomy as the study of the application of beliefs about the stars to all aspects of human culture, from religion and science to the arts and literature. It includes the new discipline of archaeoastronomy - the study of astronomical alignments, orientation and symbolism in architecture, ancient and modern within a cultural context. An expanded definition of the term could include the politics of the space race, UFO cults and popular astrology. Can we talk about 'cultural astrology' and, if so, as with 'cultural astronomy', does it refer to the practice, or the academic study of the practice?

The argument as to whether astrological claims have an absolute reality or are culturally-dependent has received little attention amongst astrologers, even though, in addition to the wide variations in western astrology, entirely different systems were developed in China and the Americas. We need thought, to distinguish the idea that astrology is culturally relative from the conclusion, which some people might make, that it is therefore necessarily false. For example, Alexander Ruperti, one of the twentieth century's leading theosophical astrologers, and a member of Alice Bailey's Arcane School, stated in a lecture in the Czech Republic in the early 1990s, that the notion that 'an astrology with a capital A which exists somewhere, has always existed, and which we should all submit ourselves or be faithful to...is merely the result of our imagination' (Ruperti, Alexander (2002), *Meaning of Humanistic Astrology*, <http://www.stand.cz/astrologie/czech/texty/rez-ru-a/rez-ru-a.htm>, accessed 25 Jan. 2003: (2002: 3). Dane Rudhyar, Ruperti's mentor, also understood that astrological truths are not necessarily absolute, but must be adapted to cultural needs.

This week's work could also lead into discussions of popular culture, an area which may be developed in future work, but is not central to this module. Stuart Hall's work, though, will be introduced, as he has been highly influential in shaping the field.

Forum Question for the Week

Which notion of culture makes more sense: (1) culture is a natural product of human nature or (2) culture rises above human nature?

(Read the Forum Guidelines under ‘General Information’)

Reading

NB Start this reading with Nick’s Notes and the article by Eagleton, which is the most essential reading for the week. The short pieces by Williams and Bennett, Grossberg and Morris, then provide definitions of culture.

Tylor’s work is included as a seminal historical piece. Tylor is often considered the first to have discussed the concept of ‘culture’, and he established now controversial the notion that sophisticated (i.e. modern, western) cultures evolved from ‘primitive’ (i.e. non-western, ancient, pre-modern) ones. Few anthropologists now accept Tylor’s model, and it has become customary to discover the sophistication that was previously overlooked in ‘primitive’ cultures. However, the Tylorian model remains very strong amongst scientific sceptics who adopt a historical model in which astrology is an anachronistic legacy of primitive culture, and its existence in the modern world therefore becomes a problem to be explained.

Huxley’s piece is also historical, and Flanagan, Kern, Ingold and Morgan then take the discussion in different directions, all of which will be useful as the module develops. The two articles by Pingree and Rochberg are both critical of the orthodox view in which western culture, especially its science, is derived from ancient Greece, and the way in which this view has shaped modern cultural assumptions. There is a connection here with Edward Said’s theory of ‘orientalism’, which states, briefly, that western culture tends to despise or fear the ‘oriental’. Although Pingree and Rochberg didn’t discuss Said, as ‘orientalists’ of a kind – Mesopotamian scholars, they are conscious of the prevailing assumptions which influence the culture of academia.

There is little theoretical writing on ‘cultural astronomy’. The earliest is the article by Baity which consists of little more than an uncritical list of previous research. However, by defining the discipline of ‘ethnoastronomy’, Baity explicitly argued that it is not enough to use astronomical evidence in isolation as evidence for past astronomical (or, we could say, astrological) practices and beliefs. The chapter by Ruggles and Saunders is seminal, although its assumptions and suggested methodologies may also be critiqued. The two short pieces by Campion offer a definition of cultural astronomy and a concise history of the discipline’s development.

Tutor’s Notes

Nick Campion: Culture Notes

Reading

Benedict, Ruth, *Patterns of Culture*, New York: Mentor, 1946, chap 2 (pp. 19-40).

Bennett, Tony, Lawrence Grossberg and Meaghan Morris (eds.), *New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 63-9.

Eagleton, Terry, *The Idea of Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell 2000), pp. 1-31.
NB THIS IS ALSO AVAILABLE AS AN E-BOOK

Flanagan, Kieran, *The Enchantment of Sociology*, (London: MacMillan, 1999), chap 1.

Hall, Stuart. 'Cultural Studies: two paradigms', *Media, Culture and Society*, 1980, Vol. 2, pp. 57-72.

Huxley, Thomas Edward, 'Science and Culture', from *Science and Education*, Appleton-Century-Crofts Inc., 1893, in Martin Gardner, *Great Essays in Science*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1985, pp. 130-148.
E BOOK

Ingold, Tim, "Hunting and Gathering as Ways of Perceiving the Environment" pp. 40-60 in Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment* (London: Routledge, 2000).

Kern, Stephen, *The Culture of Time and Space 1880-1918*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1983, chap 1 (pp. 10-35).

Morgan, David, 'Studying Religion and Popular Culture: Prospects, Presuppositions, Procedures', in Lynch, Gordon (ed.), *Between Sacred and Profane: Researching Religion and Popular Culture*, London: I.B. Tauris 2007, pp. 21-33.

Pingree, David, 'Hellenophilia versus the History of Science', *ISIS* 1991, Vol. 83, pp. 554-563.
JSTOR

Rochberg, Francesca, 'Special Section: The Cultures of Ancient Science, Introduction', *Isis*, Vol. 83, No. 4. (Dec., 1992), pp. 547-553.
JSTOR

Tylor, Edward Burnett, *Primitive Culture*, 3 Vols., (London: John Murray 1920 [1871]), Vol I, chaps 1, 2.

Williams, Raymond, *Keywords* (London: Fontana 1983), pp. 87-93.

Cultural Astronomy

Baity, Elizabeth Chesley, 'Archaeoastronomy and Ethnoastronomy So Far', *Current Anthropology*, Oct 1973, vol. 14, no. 4, pp. 389-449.
JSTOR

Campion, Nicholas, 'Editorial', *Culture and Cosmos*, Spring/Summer 1997, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 1-2.

Campion, Nicholas, 'Introduction: Cultural Astronomy', in Nicholas Campion, Patrick Curry and Michael York (ed.) *Astrology and the Academy*, papers from the inaugural conference of the Sophia Centre, Bath Spa University College, 13-14 June 2003 (Bristol: Cinnabar Books, 2004) pp. xv-xxx.

Ruggles, Clive and Nicholas Saunders, 'The Study of Cultural Astronomy' in Clive Ruggles and Nicholas Saunders, *Astronomies and Cultures* (Colorado: University of Colorado Press, 1993) pp. 1-31.

Web Sites: Archaeoastronomy and Astronomy in Culture

The Society for Astronomy in Culture

<http://www.mikrob.com/seac>

Conferences on the Inspiration of Astronomical Phenomena

<http://ethel.as.arizona.edu/~white/insap/insap4x.htm>

The International Society for Archaeoastronomy and Astronomy in Culture

<http://www.wam.umd.edu/~tlaloc/archastro/>

Culture web sites

Cyber Culture

<http://otal.umd.edu/~rccs/biblio.html>

Web culture

<http://www.sociosite.net/topics/culture.php#WEBCULTURE>