



Culture

Introduction to CAA week 1

Nick Campion

MA CAA Week one: Culture.

- Why do we need to know what culture is?

Because this is the MA in

Cultural

Astronomy and Astrology



MA CAA Week one: Culture.

- Crucial questions:
- What is culture?
- What is the relationship between culture and nature?
- To what extent are ways of seeing the universe culturally conditioned?
- Key reading: Terry Eagleton on Culture



First - theory

- It is a feature of academic work that a great deal of attention of paid to theory.
- Therefore at every stage, in every part of this MA, there are references to theory, to models of how we think and behave.
- We could ask, do we do anything without having a theory of the way the world works?
- As we shall see, such a theory can be described as a cosmology.



Theory



- 'Theory' is a very difficult word to define...For the time being I propose to define theory as follows: theory is the order we put facts in. I will go on to discuss the extent to which 'facts' exist independently of theory, and how we might define 'facts'.
- Johnson, Matthew, *Archaeological Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), p. 2

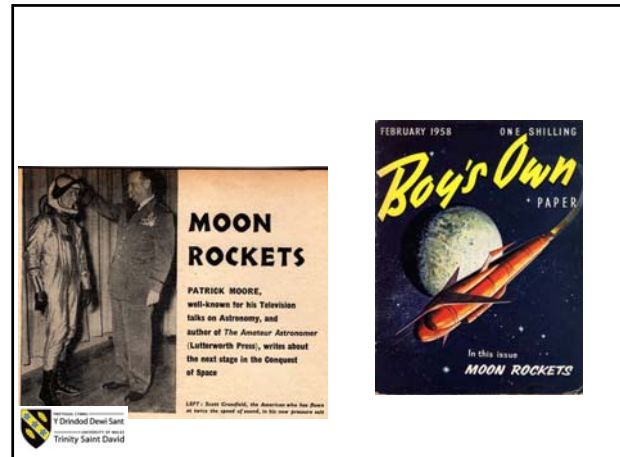


Do you look at the light or the dark? What do you see?



© 1986 Jerry Lodriguss and John Martinez





- "'Culture" is said to be one of the two or three most complex words in the English language, and the term which is sometimes considered to be its opposite - nature - is commonly awarded the accolade of being the most complex of all'.
- Eagleton, Terry, *The Idea of Culture*, Oxford: Blackwell 2000, p. 1.



- 'Culture, or Civilisation, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society'.

• Tylor, Edward Burnett, *Primitive Culture*, 3 Vols., New York: Harper Torchbooks 1958 [London: Murray 1871], Vol. I, 'The origins of Culture', p. 1.



- Culture is 'an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic form'.
- Geertz, Clifford, 'Religion as a Cultural System', in Religion as a Cultural System, in: Banton, Michael P. (ed.): *Anthropological approaches to the study of religion*. London/UK 1966: Tavistock and New York: Frederick A. Praeger Press, 1966, p. 3.
- http://www.iwp.uni-linz.ac.at/ix/sektktf/ge/GeertzTexts/Religion_System.htm.



- 'Without symbolism there could be no culture...Culture is not itself formed of symbols, but of the meaning that lies behind and unites symbols. This meaning only exists in the minds of participants in culture, but it is acted out through the manipulation of symbols, which objectify meaning'.

• [Mary LeCron Foster, 'Symbolism: The Foundation of Culture', in Tim Ingold (ed.), *The Companion Encyclopedia of Anthropology* (London, 1994), pp. 366-95, on p. 366]

• Lecturer in Anthropology at California State University, d.2003



The interaction of 'Culture' and 'Nature' – the case of the pearl

- A pearl is formed when the mantle tissue of a Mollusc – e.g. an oyster or a mussel – is injured by a parasite or a fish attack
- In response, the mollusc secretes a substance called nacre, a cyst that forms to protect the vulnerable mantle tissue while it is healing. As the layers of nacre build up, they form what is known as a pearl.
- Natural pearls occur naturally, by chance.
- Cultured pearls are a human creation, although they still depend on the mollusc's natural response to injury. A tissue graft from a donor oyster or mussel is introduced into a new mollusc, around which a pearl forms over a period of several years.
- Cultured pearls are a marriage between nature (the pearl-producing natural facility of the mollusc) and human intervention (farming the Molluscs, hybridising them, and introducing different shapes of tissue graft and even different coloured dyes to the mollusc to create a wide variety of pearls).



Myth and the Origins of Culture – Culture Bringers

- In the myths of various cultures, there are gods or heroes who are described by modern scholars as 'culture-bringers'. This term is a modern invention, but the function of these mythic figures is similar across cultures. They teach or initiate humans into particular arts and sciences which allow for the development of society and the control of nature for human benefit.
- The art of writing is almost universally attributed to a deity. In Egypt, the god Thoth was perceived as the creator of writing, and taught the art to humans.
- In Greece, writing was the gift of Hermes.
- The Titan Prometheus, according to Aeschylus, brought the gift of fire, and taught humans the arts of architecture, navigation, and astrology.



Myth and Origins – Culture Bringers 2

- The goddess Athene taught humans how to cultivate the olive tree and use its fruit for food and oil.
- The goddess Demeter, in gratitude for his assistance in helping to locate her lost daughter Persephone, taught the art of cultivating crops to the young man Triptolemus, who in turn taught it to other Greeks.
- In the Hindu Rig Veda X:40.2, the god Agni gave 'the gift of holy fire' to humans.
- In Babylonian myth, culture was taught by the Fish-Man Oannes.
- In early Jewish esoteric law, angels and prophets take the role of culture-bringers. The angel Raziel, for example, taught humans the magical arts. Moses received the revelation of the Torah directly from God.
- The presence of mythic culture-bringers suggests that the arts of culture are perceived as divine gifts, rather than emerging from slow and steady human development and innovation, and in this mythic context, divine revelation in the form of gnosis (knowledge derived directly from the divine) or inspiration generates culture, rather than culture generating knowledge.



Culture and Race

- From the mid-19th century onward, culture was often synonymous with race, which became appropriated by the Aryan-Semitic debate of the late 19th and early to mid-20th centuries:
- Race then defines culture, and values can be attached (superior, inferior, more or less creative, materialistic, or spiritual) to different races and therefore to different cultures.
- This idea can also be found in the astronomy/astrology of the classical world, with different races coming under different zodiacal signs that indicate their defining characteristics (see, for example, Ptolemy's *Tetrabiblos*). In the classical astrological idea, though, there was no superiority or hierarchy, only difference.



Essentialism

- 'Essentialism', 'substantialism' or 'universalism', proposes that there is something **essential** to humanity, or to life in general, which cannot be reduced to context and which may be influenced by, but is not generated by, culture.
- That is, there is a real underlying 'essence' underpinning the entire world. This essence is usually conceived as being psychic or psychological.
- The tradition of essentialism in the western world is traced to Plato.
- Leading modern essentialists include C. G. Jung and religious historians influenced by him, such as Mircea Eliade, Gilles Quispel and Joseph Campbell.
- Counter arguments:
 - Apparently universal phenomena are not really as similar as they seem.
 - Local variations are dominant



Theories of Cultural Exchange

- **Acculturation**
 - the result of the encounter between two cultures
 - typically in the modern world through colonialism
 - usually seen as one culture absorbing another
 - for example, a colonised culture takes on the attributes of the colonial one.
- **Transculturalization**
 - Fernando Ortiz, 1940.
 - Two cultures merge or mutually interact, influence each other and perhaps produce a third culture.
 - Explanations for transcultural phenomena may include
 - Cognitive, e.g. the human brain is hard-wired to produce similar perceptions regardless of cultural context)
 - Archetypal, e.g. patterns exist both within the human psyche and in life itself which generate ideas, models, beliefs, and experiences that infuse and shape cultures, rather than cultures generating ideas). (See Plato, week 2).
 - 'Intertextuality' – the subtle influence of texts on other texts



Culture v Nature



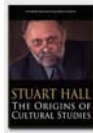
- The notion of culture as 'high' culture, and distinct from nature was articulated by Matthew Arnold in *Culture and Anarchy*
- '[culture is] the best which has been thought and said' (Preface to *Culture and Anarchy*)
- Published 1867-8, published as book 1869, preface added 1875.
- On line at
- <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/4212>
- <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/4212/pg4212.html>

- **Cultural context**
- a specific group or society existing at a specific place and time which provides the background framework of ideas, values, and structures that infuse all 'cultural products', e.g. Social structures, religious representations, rituals, styles of art, and group aspirations.
- **Cultural relativism**
- pluralises the concept of culture, and is related to 'culture-specific' and 'cultural context'.



- High Culture
- Popular Culture
- Cultural Studies
 - Hegemony
 - Semiotics

Arguments about whether 'popular culture' is an instrument of (a) oppression by the ruling class or (b) liberation by the working class.



Society and Belief: Culture in Context

- In his book, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England*, Alan Macfarlane asks 'How far do changes in the economic, religious, political, and social structures affect beliefs?'.
- Alan Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England*, Routledge, London, 1999 (1970), p. 250.



- 'cultural systems..... do not exist in a vacuum and how cultural systems categorise "nature" impacts upon socially organised conduct towards nature'.
- Edward A Tiryakian, *Neither Marx nor Durkheim ... Perhaps Weber*, *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol 81, No.1, July 1975, p19

- A crucial question:
- Does culture differentiate humanity from nature
- does the creation of great art raise us above our animal natures?



OR.....

- Does culture emerge from nature?
- E.g. The culture of football hooligans
- And do animals have culture?



Astrology and Culture

- Astrology may be 'culture-specific' – in other words, it is not possible to study astrology 'in the abstract' or in its 'essential form' without understanding it in relation to a specific culture in company with the religious, social, economic, and political currents of that culture, e.g. the Greco-Roman world in late antiquity, India, or the modern west.
-
- Or is there such a thing as an 'essential' astrology independent of cultural context?
-



Cultural Relativism amongst Astrologers



- the notion that 'an astrology with a capital A which exists somewhere, has always existed, and to which we should all submit ourselves or be faithful to...is merely the result of our imagination'.
- Rupert, Alexander (2002), *Meaning of Humanistic Astrology*, p. 3, <http://www.stand.cz/astrologie/czech/texty/rez-ru-a/rez-ru-a.htm>, consulted 25 Jan. 2003.
- (Unfortunately this link is now broken)
- See also Rudhyar, Dane, *The Lunation Cycle: A Key to the Understanding of Personality*, Santa Fe: Aurora Press 1967, pp. 9, 12, 13.
-
- The argument is that the underlying essence (the spiritual reality, some would say) is true, but astrology, as means of understanding the essence, has no essential truth).



Cultural Astronomy/Astrology

- What do we mean by this?
-
- Astrology/onomy **in** culture - i.e. as part of culture
-
- Astrology/onomy **as a** culture - i.e. as a culture in itself
-
- Sub-cultures within astrology/onomy?
-
- Do/does astrology/onomy have an existence as a set of absolutes independent of culture?

