

MA in Cultural Astronomy and Astrology
Introduction to Cultural Astronomy and Astrology
Week 1: Culture and Cosmos
Week Description
Nick Campion

Purpose of the week

The question which runs through the whole MA is the extent to which humanity's images, representations and uses of the sky, and people's feelings, thoughts and dreams of the sky are conditioned by culture – or genuinely in tune with something deeper or real.

Thought 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?

Tasks this week

- Do the required reading.
- Select from the optional reading
- Pace yourself and don't take on too much.
- Think about your first essay.

Prepare for next week:

- Read Nick's powerpoint on Plato and the Stoics: question what are the implications for astrology?
- Read the discussion document: *Timaeus* 27-44
- Read Bernadette's powerpoint on Aristotle

Class Description

The class addresses the contested but crucial concept of culture, the starting point for the entire MA in *Cultural Astronomy and Astrology*. Culture is one of those words, like religion, that everyone thinks they understand. But, as soon as we begin to examine the word, we discover that its meaning is highly problematic.

A number of issues lie at the root of the application of culture to cosmology, astronomy and astrology.

The first is the question of cultural diversity – the observation that all three areas of activity and study (and we shall deal with definitions of each over the coming weeks) adopt different assumptions, styles and truth claims in various cultures.

The second is the implication that, if some truth claims vary with culture, are truth claims dependent on culture? We reach no final conclusions to such questions (that is not out task) but we can debate and discuss them.

We have called this week culture and cosmos because, although we don't deal with cosmology until later we can identify two modern uses of the word cosmology. One is of cosmology as the scientific study of the cosmos. The other is that a cosmology is a world-view – a view of how the world works. In the second sense then we all have a cosmology that informs or rationalises our attitudes and behaviour. In that sense a theory of 'culture' can be contained within a cosmology. That said, don't worry about cosmology this week. We will stick with studying the theory of culture as a foundation for future weeks.

We begin with 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?

Cultural Astronomy is defined in Nick Campion's editorial to the first issue of the journal *Culture and Cosmos*, as the study of the application of beliefs about the stars, planets and celestial bodies 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) and ethnoastronomy (astronomy in non-western cultures). 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. What are the implications of this for astrology? Are all systems of astrology equal, the implication being that there is no one 'true' astrology? Or are some systems 'true' and others 'false'? Astrologers in the modern west are divided on this issue.

On the other hand, critics of astrology as a whole often say that all systems of astrology are equally false. This is the language of science, but within cultural studies and disciplines such as history and anthropology, notions as truth and falsehood are very difficult ones, especially when we are dealing with such complex and amorphous topics as astrology. Historians and anthropologists observe and interpret (and sometimes explain) human behaviour, in the hope that they can better understand humanity (and themselves) but cannot decide what is 'true'.

We need, though, 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

But there is not one Astrology with a capital A. In each epoch, the astrology of the time was a reflection of the kind of order each culture saw in celestial motions, of the kind of relationship the culture formulated between heaven and earth'.¹

in a lecture in the Czech Republic in the early 1990s, which was unfortunately placed on a web page which has since been taken down, 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'.²

Ruperti believed that the language, techniques and symbols of astrology were culturally based, and could therefore have use, value or meaning for different people in different cultures. In this sense, to speak of an individual being born with the Sun in Aries in the western zodiac provides meaning to an astrologer using the western system, while an Indian astrologer might see the Sun in Pisces at the birth of the same individual, and make sense of this using Indian astrology. In this sense, technical and interpretative systems of astrology have no meaning in themselves.

Dane Rudhyar, Ruperti's mentor, also understood that astrological truths are not necessarily absolute, but must be adapted to cultural needs. Thus, within the world of astrology itself, the argument that astrological systems are culturally conditioned flourishes.

However, this doesn't mean to say that, within the Rudhyar-Ruperti conception astrology is entirely culturally relative. While the technical and interpretative systems of astrology may be entirely culturally relative, the underlying spiritual truths in which both thought that astrology can reveal are not relative. These spiritual truths are real and underpin the entirety of human existence. This philosophy is known as 'essentialism', and argues that there is a real, objective 'essence' which underlies the entire universe.

We can therefore look at astrology as an expression of culture, but also at astrology itself as containing a theory – or theories – of culture.

¹Alexander Ruperti, 'Dane Rudhyar—March 23, 1895 – September 13, 1985— A Seed-Man for the New Era', accessnewage.com, originally printed in *Astrological Journal* Vol. 33 no 2 (Spring 1986), p. 55. See also <http://accessnewage.com/articles/astro/rud8.htm> [accessed 25 June 2017]. See also Rudhyar, Dane, *The Lunation Cycle: A Key to the Understanding of Personality*, Santa Fe: Aurora Press 1967, pp. 9, 12, 13.

² Ruperti, Alexander (2002), *Meaning of Humanistic Astrology*, p. 3, <http://www.stand.cz/astrologie/czech/texty/rez-ru-a/rez-ru-a.htm>, [accessed 25 Jan. 2003].

Over the course of this module you will have a chance to engage further with concepts of astrology and culture, as well as the relationships between astronomy and culture, and cosmology and culture. We will introduce issues in each. For example when we use the term 'Cultural Astronomy', are we saying that it is an academic discipline, or a subject area, drawing on different disciplines? Or does it describe that actual practices and beliefs that a culture holds about the sky?

First, though we need to understand what we mean by culture.