



GLOBAL CULTURAL INDUSTRY: THE MEDIATION OF THINGS SCOTT LASH & CELIA LURY (2007)

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Abstract

We want to preface on this review that the content of this review is our perspective on how we understood the text. The deconstruction of some academic terminology has been achieved by ensuring the consistency of appreciation of the author's original work. The context of our review reflects our personal experience and that of our diversity. The knowledge acquired has been underpinned in the principle of creativity to ensure that the work from the text is reviewed to suit any discourse for a more fundamental understanding of such comprehensive and diverged texts.

Keywords

Mediation of things, Global culture, Platforms, Globalization, Objectification.



Book Review

Global Cultural Industry: the mediation of things is a book written by two famous contemporary sociologist of Culture, namely Scott Lash (University of London) and Celia Lury (University of Warwick), and published in 2007 as an attempt to overcome the analysis of the cultural industries developed by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkeimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944). The authors' central argument is that sixty years after the publishing of what has been once

considered as "the handbook of critical theory" (pp.1), the cultural industry has grown and fully embraced globalization to develop new operatory modes that turned it into global cultural industries. If culture was a matter of representation before, by integrating economic logic and invading our everyday lives, the global industry is now turning things into media. In short, culture has changed, and this book is proposing an exploration into the mediation of things by the global cultural industry.

To achieve such a turning point in the sociology of Culture, Lash and Lury precisely expose in their introduction the different shifts they observed, and that turned the cultural industry into the new global cultural industry. Opposing the assumption made by Adorno and Horkeimer that reproducibility turns culture into the exchange of identical commodities, the authors argue that today the "production and consumption are processes of the construction of difference" (pp.5). The concept of commodity seems actually out of use, and the cultural industry is now being ruled by new global actors that are the brands. A brand, through its history, its values, and its exchange-value, is then an operator of distinctiveness that turns the industrialized likeness of cultural goods into a social marker of distinction. Unlike Adorno and Horkeimer's cultural industry where the mediation was mainly operated through representation (for instance in paintings), in the global cultural industry we assist to the second movement of mediation of things and thingification of media, where culture not exclusively rely on its aesthetic value anymore but rather on its use and change-value. In the flux and flow of globalization, the cultural superstructure has collapsed and gathered with the base in the center, "in something like a media environment" (pp.9). Relying on analysis from essential scholars of the second half of the twentieth century (Appadurai, Foucault, Deleuze, and Guattari, etc. ...) the authors state that global cultural industry deal with singularities (instead of similarities), function as intensities (instead of extensities) and develop their analysis in a

metaphysical vision of the culture. The second chapter gives the reader more insights into the methodology adopted through the book and unveils the tremendous work that has been achieved by Lash and Lury. The authors developed a precise "sociology of the object." They focused their three-years-study (from 1996 to 1998) on seven products from the global culture industry: Wallace and Gromit, Toy Story, the Young British Artists, Trainspotting, Nike, Swatch and the global-football. It is explained those cultural goods have been chosen both for their "relatively high visibility" and "potentially long and varied trajectory" (pp.16). Despite its originality back in the days, the importance they still bear in the global popular culture more than twenty years later proves how these examples are highly relevant in this study. The choice of the anthropological approach of biography (defended by I. Kopytoff) as a way to thoroughly analyze the life-course of an object and the "follow-the-object" methodology borrowed from Appadurai also make sense concerning the author's wish to develop "humanism of the inhuman" (pp.20). The shift Lash and Lury operate is not only modern but also scientific, assuming that cultural objects are no longer texts we interpret but purposes we use and thus shifting from epistemology to an ontological approach. One of the substantial assets of this book stands in the ability of its authors to swing from an essential and precise intellectual development in the first and the second chapter into an in-depth empirical analysis of several cultural products in the following pages. The chapters 3 and 4 deal

respectively with two interesting topics, the mediation of football through the biography of the cultural event “Euro ‘96” and the evolution of the art world and its imbrication to media in the global cultural industry. The chapter about the “Euro ‘96” is surprisingly less about football than it is about the branding development of a cultural event turned into a global communication platform. The authors first reveal how the music industry is using the football tournament to operate a repositioning of their bands and benefit from the attraction of football, but the focus quickly shifts to the whole brand's strategies to embrace the competition in order to maximize their visibility. Lash, and Lury thus emphasize the interconnection of multiple actors (brands, media, music) around an event in the contemporary global cultural industry. The meticulous study of the event brings the reader to some unexpected topics such as the "fashion turn" of football, the fear of supporters' violence, or the importance of the design of the logo that altogether illustrates the imbrication of global culture into a “McLuhan Galaxy” of mass communication. Media becoming the key actors of the “‘96 Euro”, the last part of the chapter is naturally devoted to the story of ISL (Switz traders and the sponsoring strategies around the event. The authors thus succeed to demonstrate how a "cultural thing," a football tournament, is finally being mediated by multiple international actors in the global cultural industry. The chapter that follows is more technical and brings the analysis in a different iconic place for global culture today, the Tate museum, where Lash and Lury discuss the relation

between art and media. In a triangular reflection ("Art as the concept," "Art as media," "Art as life"), the authors traced the biography of the Young British Artist (YBA) movement. Who is not familiar with the 1960's minimalist school or its further development as conceptual art might find some difficulties to go through this thick part filled with a lot of detailed information and references? Though the YBA were teenagers from the Thatcher era facing intense boredom and decomposition of social and political values, they eventually found a way to turn their situation into provocative creativity. These artists deproblematize and embraced the Debord's society of spectacle and soon shared their grunge aesthetics through mass media. For the authors, the path of the YBA illustrates the post-hegemonic era and the displacement of power. At the same time, art does not function as hegemony anymore but rather as a communication tool.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7, outline two parallel processes at stake in the global culture industry: the thingification of media and the mediation of things – and explore the implications of their convergence. Punctuated with interviews of professionals, the fifth chapter is digging into two famous animation movies that have been released in the early 2000s: the all-computer-digitalized Toy Story and the English most famous claymation Wallace and Gromit. While the technical progress is praised, it is the role of the comic – in this situation: the audience's belief of toys acting like humans and the fanatic reliance of the character of Wallace in technology – that is

first analyzed through the works of Bergson and Freud. Then, the authors state that the conflict between surface and object, which characterizes animation movies, has been solved in favor of an organized system of objects. Those two movies benefit from a tremendous marketing advantage lies in the fact that the commodities are already pre-existing inside the creations, since the characters can be – and have been – infinitely reproduced in by-products and commercial collaborations from fridge magnets to t-shirts. Given the critical revenue generated from merchandising, the authors show that media such as animated movies – “Trainspotting” is another example of the actual film – can be turned into things-driven creations. The chapter that follows is then offering the backward analysis of cultural goods turned into media through the biography of the Swiss brand Swatch and the American brand Nike. The main concern here is to point out how the manufacturing industry is following the global culture industry pattern and how reproduction is no longer a matter of standardization but rather a case of mediation and differentiation. Born in troubled times for the watch industry, Swatch built its success on a robust glocalised strategy proudly defending its Switz professionalism and being sold all over the world. Lash and Lury unravel the ingenious watch personalization that was enabled by the automation of the production and the by-products provided by the firm that seems to be far from concerning a watch brand. Not many brands can compete with the Swoosh brand Nike when it comes to the construction of a media empire out of

an industrial commodity – shoes. Here again, the readers discover the story of a brand that was once distributing running shoes, and that is now able to disrupt national leagues of football through multi-million dollar contracts with sportspeople. Technology perfectionism and tremendous commodification development even brought the authors to state that "Nike wants everything" (pp.131). Theorists like Adorno, Benjamin, or Kracauer that have been pivotal in mass product analysis are relevant in these stories. The seventh chapter is an attempt to bridge the thingification of media and the mediatization of things as evoked earlier through various examples from Nike shoes to MacDonald's little presents. The concept of (flow) is here a central notion that is explicated to understand the anthropological approach of exchange, the understanding of the contemporary economy, and the mediation role embodied in media theories. Through this theoretical frame, the authors address the question of the reception of global cultural brands and finally advocate in the use of another term that eludes the presumption that cultural goods have an end: “entanglement” Chapter 8 is an original opening to this study and an attempt to locate the analysis of the global culture industry in the very different context of a developing country of the southern hemisphere: Brazil. Strongly tied to the sociopolitical context of the country, the Brazilian cultural industry has been evolving by stages: from tight control of the state and significant American broadcasting companies to mass production and consumption, to finally reach neoliberalism through the

development of the internet. Thanks to numerous interviews conducted with key actors in the multimedia industry, the authors re-use some cultural products earlier analyzed like *Trainspotting* or *Wallace and Gromit* to point out the specificity of the Brazilian cultural sector.

Eventually, in quite a flourished and dense conclusion, Lash and Lury emphasized the results of their lengthy analysis of the global shift in the cultural industry. They state: "With globalization, culture becomes fully industrial" (pp.181). Thus, the culture shifted from representation to inscribe itself in the register of things while media became objects. In this process, the importance of the audience as consumers of by-products issued from media is here reaffirmed, and the virtuality of contemporary culture is not denounced, nor is it praised but objectively relocated in capitalism ("the power of virtual capitalism" (pp.183)). This book, bearing such an ambitious project – that is to renew the old vision of the cultural industries by the critical theorist Adorno and Horkeimer succeeds in bringing new elements – both empirical and theoretical – to the contemporary age of the sociology of culture. The profound analysis of several cultural products that are still shaping popular culture more than twenty years after the authors ground research is the strongest asset of the *Global Cultural Industry: the mediation of things*. Nevertheless, its surgeon precision in the biography of the cultural goods studied, and the incredible number of theories and theorists gathered in this book are also one of its

weaknesses, preventing a smooth reading from any non-scholar audience.

Our Reflection

It is interesting to learn that the "*Global Cultural Mediation of Things*" evolved from a very different spectrum from globalization culture, which became industrialization. Creative culture turned a significant shift from the representation of the logic to the logic of things where media shifted from the usual registered to the "objectification". From the change, it could be learned that objects turned out to be the flow of the subject in discussion. As the regime change, so is the culture; this formulates a system of objects. Therefore, culture representational is incorporated in the realism paradigms. As for realism breaks, culture realism also follows suit while trying to criticize realism. The entire regime of representation is fundamentality broken by the emerging of new culture. The industrialization of art then has turned out to be the industry of culture with some aspects of technology. We agree with Scott Lash and Celia Lury that if there is no culture, the regimes would have suffered; hence there will be no existence. From the genesis of culture, there has been proof of the development of different objects, which have, therefore, leveraged to turn out to be media products. Consumers have continued to enjoy this while the producers have turned out to generate capitals and profits for their different ventures. This means that cultural barriers will require to be overcome before technological development is achieved. The current developmental issues in culture are well explicated by Scott Lash and Celia

Lury when they at first recognize the objects and their formation.

References

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