

TO DEFINE CULTURE IN A VIRTUAL WORLD by Paul M. Summitt (2001)

What makes up the culture of an individual? How is it that an individual comes to prefer certain of Gans' "taste cultures" over others? Do I, as an individual, have my own culture or am I a member of a larger group that represents a culture? In the next few pages I will suggest that, in today's mediated (and therefore possibly virtual) society, I am, as is every individual, the center of culture for myself. It is from this individual culture that common belief, meaning, and value that make up the so-called mass culture are derived. I will begin by examining two instances of mediated views of culture. I will suggest that through mediation societies become virtual. This paper will then continue by surveying the various meanings of the word culture that communication scholars have put forth and how these definitions divide and diminish the idea of an individual's culture. By using additive rather than subtractive techniques, it may be conceivable to find O'Conner's "single authoritative definition" of culture without avoiding the investigation of the disagreements that the various partisan definitions put forth. I will then continue with a discussion of this additive technique for examining an individual's culture. The paper will then conclude by proposing possible future applications of this method of the study of culture in the field of communication.

We begin by examining two examples of mediated views of culture. The first example is from the opening of the motion picture *Zardoz*. The second example is from the episode "Birthright, Part 1" from the television series *Star Trek: The Next Generation*.

Zardoz begins with the disembodied head of Arthur Frane floating around the screen as it gradually gets closer to the viewer. During this visual distraction Frane speaks directly to the viewer as he explains some rules, or practices, that control the world the viewer is about to experience.

Frane: I am Arthur Frane, and I am Zardoz. I have lived three hundred years and I long to die but death is no longer possible. I am immortal. I present now my story, full of mystery and intrigue, rich in irony and most satirical. It is set deep in a possible future so none of these events have yet occurred. But they may. Be warned lest you end as I. In this tale I am a fake god by occupation and a magician by inclination. Merlin was my hero. I am the puppet master. I manipulate many of the characters and events you will see. But I'm invented too for your entertainment and amusement. And you, poor creatures, who conjured you out of the clay? Is God in show business too?

In this film Frane creates the realities that many characters within the film experience. At the same time Frane is part of a reality that Boorman has created for the viewer to experience. Frane asks the question of whether Boorman and we viewers are not part of a reality for some other being to experience. Here we raise the question of multiple realities. Multiple realities are nothing new to cultivation (Gerbner & Gross) or social reality theory (for reviews, see Hawkins & Pingree; Ogles) researchers. Each of these realities have rules, practices, or protocols that must be followed. These rituals must be followed or the individual can no longer remain a member of that society, that culture, or that reality.

In our second example of a mediated view of culture, Lt. Commander Data (Brent Spiner), the android officer aboard the *Enterprise*, experiences a vision of his creator, Doctor Soong. Data seeks advice about how to interpret this vision from Captain Jean-Luc Picard (Patrick Stewart). The following conversation results.

Data: I have analyzed over four thousand different religious and philosophical systems as well as over two hundred psychological schools of thought in an effort to understand what happened.

Picard: And what have you found?

Data: I've been unable to find a single interpretation of the images I saw during the time I was shut down. The hammer, for instance, has several meanings. The Klingon culture views the hammer as a symbol of power, however, the Tapo Tribe of Nagor sees it as an icon of hearth and home. The Ferengii view it as a sign of sexual prowess.

Picard: I'm curious, Mr. Data. Why are you looking at all these other cultures?

Data: The interpretation of visions and other metaphysical experiences are almost always culturally derived and I have no culture of my own.

Picard: Yes, you do. You're a culture of one. Which is no less valid than a culture of one billion. Perhaps the key to understanding your experience is to stop looking into other sources for meaning. When we look at Michelangelo's David or Seme's Tomb we don't ask what does this mean to other people. The real question is what does it mean to us. Explore this image, Data. Let it excite your imagination. Focus on it. See where it leads you. Let it inspire you.

An android is a living machine, an artificial intelligence, that appears in human form. There are no others like him within the reality of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Data is an android and therefore unique. Because of this uniqueness he says he has no culture.

Picard, however, explains that it is not what others think symbols, icons, and signs mean that is important but what they mean to the individual. Symbols, icons, signs, and all the other things that go to make up a culture come to have meaning to an individual because of past life experiences and everything is interpreted through filters. But what are some of these filters, these past life experiences, through which everything is interpreted?

The filters through which everything experienced is interpreted can be thought of as the individual's culture. I use the word here to include the concept of high culture and Gans' idea of taste cultures, which even he admits "are probably more correctly described as subcultures". I also include British anthropologist Edward B. Tylor's 1871 definition of "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" (Wagley).

Note the use of the word acquired in this definition. There are also other biological factors that must be considered in this holistic definition of culture. The biological fact that I am male and that I am white affects the "knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits" that I may acquire or learn during my life experience.

Therefore, certain biological facts must also be considered into an individual's culture. The result is that all the "different social and political viewpoints" that O'Conner differentiates must be taken into the whole of the individual's culture. It is this cultural capital that must be examined and studied and not separate samples of the whole.

It is this additive technique that can best explain the results of research when dealing with culture. Shrum and O'Guinn suggest that there is the "possibility that other factors are contributing to social reality judgements other than the variable of television viewing". Ang criticizes uses and gratifications research as taking "into account only individual uses of the media" (159). McLeod and Chaffee suggest that social reality is created when an individual gives information received through a mediated form of communication the same relative importance as that individual's direct observation of physical reality.

This social reality then becomes part and parcel of that individual's culture. During any given day I, as an individual, receive information through both personal physical reception and through technologically mediated reception. In example, my day begins with actual person-to-person face-to-face communication with my wife. This is followed by on-line technologically mediated on-line communication in cyberspace with other individuals concerning subjects that interest us. It is not unusual for our household to receive at least one phone call during the early morning. A phone conversation is a technologically mediated reality. It is artificial. You could not carry on the conversation without the technology that makes it possible. It, as with most technologies, are examples of what McLuhan (1964) called "extensions" of ourselves.

Departing my house, I drive away listening to either the local NPR radio station, from whom I receive the latest news and information, or a cassette of my current favorite music, a reproduction of that artist's work. Upon arrival at the university, I may have one or more face-to-face conversations before class (face-to-face interpersonal interaction) begins. In class we will discuss information that we read the night before from books created through technology. After class I usually sign-on to another computer message system where I again take part in discussions of current interest to me. I may also have one or more face-to-face conversations. After this I return to my car where I listen to reproductions of artistic performances until I arrive home. Another face-to-face conversation with my wife over lunch accompanies the reading of the daily postal mail and a replaying of a videotape of a film of our choice. Various readings, watching of video, and working with a computer will take up most of the remainder of the afternoon. Other telephone mediated conversations and face-to-face encounters may occur. We may drive to a local theater and view a current film.

The remainder of the evening is usually taken up with a mixture of face-to-face, television, textual, and computer mediated communications. Interestingly, any one of these bits of information that are consumed during the day will change the way other bits of information are received that follow. Decisions on which forms of mediated communications to take part in next will be made based on previous mediated communications. Each new reality is accepted based on the protocols and rules that are set up for its existence. The many realities exist side by side simultaneously.

But of what importance is this realization that the individual is the center of culture? As Ang suggests, ethnographic approaches are capable of examining the details of how the media affect our daily activities. These ethnographic approaches, being qualitative in measure, are holistic in nature and should consider more than simple definitions of culture. Looking at the culture of each individual allows the researcher to begin to see not only the demographic similarities but the how and the why of those similarities. The individual culture is created as it goes along. This individual culture is in a constant state of flux, always changing, and in an on-going process but also it is creating the meanings, values, and beliefs that can be shared with others going through similar life experiences. The

individual is therefore the center of culture because it is within the individual culture that mass culture (or mass market, if preferred) is made possible.

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