m c journal
A JOURNAL OF MEDIA AND CULTURE

Editorial:

'Culture'

Susan Luckman & **Alec McHoul** | Respond To This Article |

1   The original idea for this issue of M/C was for contributors to discuss the many and varying possible meanings of the word "culture" and/or the various uses of the concepts of culture (in general) and cultures (in particular). If that original project had stood, then only the papers in the "Cultural Theory" middle section (Laba, McHoul, Mules) would have filled the brief in the strictest sense.

2   In that section, Martin Laba begins by taking apart philosophical and anthropological versions of culture and running them up against his own experiences of cultural action in Pakistan (where "cultural action" is opposed to "theoretical insinuation"). Behind Laba's "ethnography", for those who have eyes to read it, lies a deep and trenchant critique of what is now the dominant and, to some extent, restrictive discipline in the area, Cultural Studies.

3   This is followed by Alec's own paper which, on the surface, deals with a rather obscure (and atypical) dialogue of Heidegger's. It could, of course, have been located in the "Crossing Cultures" section (Berger, Degabriele, Gillard, Hyndman). But that's not the main point. The main point is to effect a critique -- in the Kantian sense of pushing to the limits in order to define -- of the idea of culture, by asking "When are we in the presence of a culture and not something else altogether?" The fundamental assumption here is that, ontologically, the cultural is a quite specific domain, contrary to the popular idea that "everything is cultural".

4   Warwick Mules takes this up in a different and original way by asking how the concept of culture is practically challenged by current technologies. His argument is that our idea of culture is always tainted by the idea of physical presence. When new technologies allow that presence to be removed, what shall we then take as "the cultural"? As it turns out, for Mules, the cultural then becomes much more significant and less dominated by its "other" -- the social. As he writes: "the reduction of culture to the social should be replaced by an inquiry into the proliferation of the social through the cultural, as so many experiences of the virtual in time and space".

5   So all of that would make a fine issue in itself. Except that we received much more challenging and contestable papers that opened up the question of culture by showing it rather than saying it. Arthur Asa Berger's paper, to start with, looks like the "pure theory" of Section 2, since it starts with something called "the origins of the term". But, in fact, by looking at travellers' stories -- and so using cultural difference as its sticking post -- and then coming back, after the fact, to the question of culture itself, leaves us wondering about the very idea. His view, that culture makes a "big difference", opens matters up in new ways that "pure theory" could never resolve.

6   Shifting the ground, Maria Degabriele asks what happens when a traditionally non-culturalist discipline opens its doors to the idea of culture. Here, she writes specifically of Business Studies -- perhaps one of the last areas of intellectual inquiry where we'd expect to find culture discussed. Although critical of how Business Studies manipulates the idea of culture, she concludes with the possibility of opening a dialogue between the disciplines and how that may be done.

7   Then we move on, again in the disciplinary sense, to Garry Gillard's investigation of culture in Freud's meaning of the term. If "Freud reads culture like a text", as Gillard says from the outset, then there might be a possible super-text, that is also a mind-culture system. The consequences of such a hypothesis are far-reaching -- because, if Gillard is right, then culture is built into the psychoanalytic project from the start rather than being a mere add-on to an analysis of individual minds.

8   Then the David Hyndman paper takes us back to the more "practical" world by making

us read the pages of perhaps the international cross-cultural organ, the National Geographic. Who, in the West, has never seen such pages? Who has never taken this ubiquitous organ as their own way into the culturally "exotic"? What Hyndman does is to take us there -- again -- but with a critical edge. And, in the process, shows us what the common sense idea of culture is in its mediated form.

9   What surprised us, as editors of these pieces, was how often the question of culture overlapped with the question of identity. Somehow the two are intrinsically linked perhaps? To open this possibility, Felicity Newman, Tracey Summerfield and Reece Plunkett stage three quite different and distinct reflections on three equally distinct forms of cultural identity: being a Jew, being a lawyer and being a dyke. What emerges from this is a rather curious paradox: identities are radically different both in their "content" and in the ways in which different persons come to acquire and accept them. What is shown here, even if it's not said, is this: can there be a single theory of cultural identity that can cope with such incredible differences? If not, then identity itself may be a radically and irrevocably fractured concept.

10   Something similar emerges when we look at cultural identities that are specific and local in the geographical sense. Here, Catherine Richardson takes us through the question of culture in an Australian country town, Tamworth, during an election phase. What is opened here is the possibility of islands of relatively stable cultural identity in a world which Richardson sees as otherwise fragmented and fractured and therefore torn by anxiety about cultural identities.

11   Finally, Nadine Wills opens up the questions of cultural identity and cross-cultural alterity by turning to the everyday matter of clothing. Her argument is that "culture defines itself not only by what is contained within but by what is outside its boundaries as well". Working, then, with the dual concepts of borderlines and "transition discourses", Wills shows us how these can be used to analyse cultures as inter-connected small worlds.

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-- 'Culture' Issue Editors

Citation reference for this article

MLA style:

Susan Luckman, Alec McHoul. "Editorial: 'Culture'." M/C: A Journal of Media and Culture 3.2 (2000). [your date of access] <http://www.api-network.com/mc/0005/edit.php>.

Chicago style:

Susan Luckman, Alec McHoul, "Editorial: 'Culture'," M/C: A Journal of Media and Culture 3, no. 2 (2000), <http://www.api-network.com/mc/0005/edit.php> ([your date of access]).

APA style:

Susan Luckman, Alec McHoul. (2000) Editorial: 'Culture'. M/C: A Journal of Media and Culture 3(2). <http://www.api-network.com/mc/0005/edit.php> ([your date of access]).