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The Production of Culture Perspective in Historical Research: Integrating the Production, Meaning and Reception of Symbolic Objects

Citation for published version:

Nathaus, K & Clayton Childress, C 2013, 'The Production of Culture Perspective in Historical Research: Integrating the Production, Meaning and Reception of Symbolic Objects' *Zeithistorische Forschungen / Studies in Contemporary History*, vol 10, no. 1, pp. 1-16.

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:

Zeithistorische Forschungen / Studies in Contemporary History

Publisher Rights Statement:

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Klaus Nathaus/C. Clayton Childress**The Production of Culture Perspective in Historical Research:
Integrating the Production, Meaning and Reception of
Symbolic Objects****Structure:**

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[Notes](#)[The Authors](#)[Citation Recommendation](#)**Text:**

Historians have analyzed films, novels, records, theater plays etc. primarily in reference to their meaning and reception. This article makes a case for moving the focus to the actors, structures and processes that shape symbolic objects before these are consumed. To this end, we present a framework established in US sociology to study the fabrication, distribution and evaluation of symbolic content. We discuss the production of culture perspective as an approach that appears to be particularly useful for historical research and, by reviewing selected works from the sociological literature, demonstrate how this perspective can be applied to phenomena like popular music and literary fiction. We focus on genres as bundles of conventions as one lens through which historians may analyze the creation, reproduction, evaluation and consumption of culture.

In the last three decades, media content such as films, recorded music, novels, photographs and radio and television programs has drawn increasing interest from historians who study the role of culture in past societies. Two approaches are dominant. The first approach focuses on the *meaning* of these symbolic objects and perceives them as representing coherent sets of values, norms and beliefs which are shared by social groups and inform individual behavior. The underlying assumption of this approach is that symbolic structures and human agency are mutually connected: Symbolic objects make mani-fest the world views of individuals, and these dispositions in turn guide their actions. The second approach shifts the focus from meaning to *reception* and starts from the baseline that meaning is constructed by recipients who make their own sense of symbolic objects through processes of acceptance, adaptation, or dismissal. Consequently, the consumers of content may be active agents in establishing meanings that differ from the intentions of creators and suppliers. Often drawing from the British cultural studies tradition, the approach treats meaning as 'contested' or 'negotiated', highlights the 'agency' of audiences and is primarily interested in the 'struggle' for cultural hegemony.¹

We present a third approach, which has achieved dominance in US sociology over the last forty years. The *production of culture perspective* focuses on 'how the symbolic elements of culture are shaped by the systems within which they are created, distributed, evaluated, taught, and preserved'.² We first sketch out the approach in its initial formulation, which was concerned with the fabrication of symbolic content and expressly avoided questions of meaning. The second section discusses more recent initiatives to widen the perspective to include meaning and reception by analyzing 'cultural fields' and genres. In the conclusion we highlight two areas in which scholars of contemporary history may employ the perspective.

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This poster of 1968/69 shows how Jimi Hendrix and his progressive rock music were introduced to German audiences as a form of art. Well-known designer Günther Kieser (b. 1930) had created much of the art work for the American Folk Blues Festival, which was organized since 1962 by the concert agency of Horst Lippmann and Fritz Rau and brought many American blues and jazz musicians to West Germany. Framing Hendrix in a similar fashion pitched his concerts to an audience that had acquired a taste for 'authentic' African-American music but might have been wary of the commercial success of many 'white' rock bands of the day. The production of culture perspective is concerned with the way content such as rock music is evaluated and framed for consumption.

(photo [of Jimi Hendrix]: Novo Studio/Silverstein; poster design: Günther Kieser; [Deutsches Plakat Museum](#), Essen, DPM 14778; poster photo: Jens Nober)



1. Studying the Fabrication of Content: The Production of Culture Perspective in the 1970s

The production of culture perspective came of age as a self-conscious research position in US sociology in the 1970s.³ Until then, scholars in the social sciences and humanities generally had perceived culture as sets of norms, values or beliefs that were manifested through expressive symbols which occurred in lockstep with evolutions in society. The Marxist version of this concept implied that class relations served as the 'base' of society which shaped the 'superstructure' of culture; the functionalist perspective claimed that values determine the structure of society. In both cases, culture and society were thought to develop gradually and over long periods of time via processes of mutual adaptation.

The production perspective took issue with this correspondence thesis. Leaving aside questions of

meaning and reception, it started from the observation that in modern societies symbolic objects do not mysteriously appear but are fabricated by specialists who work in particular organizational environments. To analyze the interplay of these specialists under a set of interrelated conditions, they devised a framework that proved to be effective in explaining why particular content becomes widely disseminated at a specific point in time. The approach is best illustrated in an article on the rise of rock 'n' roll by the late Richard A. Peterson, who had been the most active proponent of the production perspective.⁴

Rock 'n' roll broke through in the US in 1955. While at the end of the 1940s four major record companies (RCA, Columbia, Capitol, American Decca) had produced 80% of the most popular records, by the late 1950s their share of 'hits' fell to about 33% as many small, independent firms released successful songs. This shift in relative sales power occurred in tandem with a stylistic shift as big band jazz was upstaged by rock 'n' roll. The change from 'crooners' to 'rockers' took only two to three years, happened in a relatively uneventful period of US history, and predated the purchasing power of 'baby boomers' who were too young to buy records. Against this backdrop, Peterson looked beyond demand explanations for the rise of rock. Instead, he focused on music producers and disseminators who work under a set of industry conditions, defined by six interrelated 'facets':

- law and regulation (for instance copyright law and broadcasting licensing),
- technology (most importantly communication media),
- industry structure (the relation between organizations that produce and disseminate content),
- organization structure (hierarchies and functional differentiations within content producing organizations),
- occupational careers (the professional outlook of content producers),
- market (the assumption of decision-makers about consumer preferences).

3▼

These six facets constitute a set of institutional and organizational constraints which may explain changes in the symbolic repertoire. The underlying hypothesis is that these facets affect the interplay between actors in the industry and thereby shape the content that results from it.

In the case of rock, Peterson first highlights the emergence of television as the new medium for family entertainment that drained audiences, advertising money, equipment and personnel from radio. A second technological innovation, the vinyl disk, was easier to transport than shellac and enabled new independent distributors to enter the market. Thirdly, the availability of cheap transistors after the war allowed for multiple radios within homes, creating the conditions for differential demand within families. Concerning law and regulation, in 1947 the governmental authority responsible for granting licenses to radio stations began to approve applications that had been neglected during the war, with the number of stations consequently doubling in most areas over a short time. In combination, these factors contributed to a situation in which 1) many poorly financed radio stations needed cheap content at a time when 2) new producers could gain entry into the industry and 3) potential audiences were freed to differentiate their musical preferences. These conditions allowed marginal actors to enter the music business and challenge the four majors. But why was it rock 'n' roll producers who moved center stage?

At the time, dominant record firms considered radio to have a negative effect on record sales, as executives thought that songs which were broadcast for free would not be purchased as records. Consequently, the major firms withheld their recordings from air play, and the national radio networks broadcast the current hits in renditions by live bands. Given their inability to compete with the major firms along traditional lines, smaller firms were forced to experiment in their relationship with broadcasters. This way, they discovered that radio play boosted rather than reduced record sales.

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Moreover, the composers and authors of 'race' and 'hillbilly' music had previously been excluded from the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP), the association that licensed music to radio stations and distributed the income among their members. ASCAP held a virtual monopoly in the market for commercial popular music. This changed with the founding of a second collecting body following a 1939 dispute between ASCAP and radio stations over increased licensing fees. Under pressure to build up a catalog quickly, Broadcast Music, Inc. (BMI) took on publishers and songwriters of genres such as jazz, latin, 'hillbilly' and rhythm and blues. In effect, BMI allowed previously marginalized producers to make money from royalties and gave their music exposure on radio when the ASCAP catalog was boycotted during the dispute. ASCAP and the radio industry eventually came to an agreement, but BMI had gained a foothold in the industry.

Likewise, the organizational structure of small record and radio companies as well as the occupational careers of those who ran them turned out to be a competitive advantage for the producers of rock 'n' roll. Small firms were controlled by 'entrepreneurs' – people who were able to react quickly to changes in their firms' environment – and relied on the 'show men' who were ready to breach established conventions when they thought that would resonate with their audience. In contrast, the major record and radio companies were operated by 'bureaucrats' and 'craftsmen'. 'Bureaucrats' primarily adhered to formal procedures and organizational hierarchies; 'craftsmen' were specialized and reputable professionals who stuck to the routines on which their status was based.

Peterson's article explains an opportunity for the widespread diffusion of symbolic objects through the perspective of those who selected, produced and disseminated content under a unique set of conditions. Similar studies on other areas of cultural production⁵ support the fundamental insight that symbolic objects do not simply emerge from a lifeworld, 'Zeitgeist' or in reflection of larger socio-political developments. Instead, they are an outcome of the shifting interplay between actors within largely self-referential 'production systems'.

5▼

The production perspective provided two important insights to the study of culture. Firstly, by showing that different types of symbolic objects emerge and recede according to changes within their production environment, the perspective provided a powerful corrective against the assumption that symbols merely represent values, ideologies or world views. Secondly, empirical studies of content production stressed the paucity of direct communication between the supply and the demand sides of culture. They showed that content providers cannot predict what the people 'out there' will appreciate tomorrow and have to address imagined *potential* consumers that are based on producers' hunches, experiences, and market research data. An indicator of this demand uncertainty is the fact that up to 90% of the products of the 'culture industries' are ultimately financial failures, meaning that most people who produce culture for financial gains make losses with most of their products.⁶ It cannot be stressed enough that while audience research can tell producers about the popularity of previous objects, it is unable to predict which particular objects people will prefer in the future, and is instead mostly used to legitimize decisions within the industry.⁷ This insight into the disconnect between producers and consumers provides a strong corrective against interpreting the relationship between producers and consumers as a form of 'negotiation'. It urges researchers to study the cultural process in its chronological order, with the creation and dissemination of content happening prior to its reception.



2. From Industries to Fields and Genres: Widening the Perspective to Meaning and Reception

Initially, the production perspective deliberately sidestepped macro-level questions about society and hermeneutic questions of meaning and positioned itself against the respective approaches. As these debates have receded, so too has the need for boundary maintenance by limiting the domain through which the production perspective operated. In the last fifteen years, next-generation production-oriented scholars have developed the approach to further investigate aspects of meaning and reception in their analyses.

An important move in this new direction is a widening from industries to fields as the object of analysis. In Europe, the concept of 'fields' is primarily associated with the work of Pierre Bourdieu, who defines fields as social spaces where actors struggle for positions, employing different forms of capital with values which are determined by the field itself.⁸ In the US, the field concept is most prominent in sociological neo-institutionalism, a line of research that asks how actors with varied interests – in our case: creators, producers and mediators of content – become oriented toward a field in the first place.⁹ Both versions of the concept enabled production perspective scholars to venture beyond 'industries' and include into the analysis intermediaries such as critics, market researchers, advertisers, accountants etc. who all contribute to the establishment of the meanings and values attached to cultural artifacts.¹⁰

6▼

N. Anand and Brittany Jones's work on the Man Booker Prize for fiction and the establishment of 'postcolonial' literature as a meaningful category of books serves as an illustrative example.¹¹ Before 1968, literature from the Commonwealth was only defined *ex negativo*: English-language literature outside of the US. Anand and Jones show how the award stimulated communication between non-US players in the book trade and attracted attention to the nascent field. Created on the model of the French Prix Goncourt, the award was sponsored by Booker plc., a conglomerate that traded in rum and engineering services and handled publishing rights as a sideline activity. While the annual prize was designed to enhance the image of the company, it had a field-configuring effect in the literary world. It gave authors, publishers, critics and retailers a 'tournament' (Brian Moeran) to negotiate artistic merits while awarding winners with money. The emerging field was economic in that the prize unified formerly dispersed commercial territories, and it was cultural in that its boundaries constructed a literary category of 'postcolonial fiction'. Formerly disparate texts from around the non-US English speaking world were now made sense of as 'of a type' which could be discussed together and ranked. The award also allowed readers to orientate their choices toward the field's self-conception of its own best works, and to know roughly what to expect from shortlisted books as they received clues on how to read and rate them from media coverage. Ultimately, readers could use their 'Booker knowledge' as conversational props and a marker of social and political distinction.

In this example – and in similar studies on 'field configuring events' like book fairs and award ceremonies¹² or on 'market information regimes' such as rankings and sales statistics¹³ – the interaction of actors with very different stakes in a field led to the establishment of meaningful and value-laden categories, which in turn shaped a general understanding of the content created under these categories. While the focus of this research is still centered on field participants, the interest has shifted from the production of content to the ways through which meaning, values and knowledge that informs and motivates actors' behavior is institutionalized. It is easy to see how these studies may follow the chain of meaning production further to include recipients, as the latter are also attracted to fields and employ its categories to make sense of what is offered to them.

For sociologists and historians alike, a point of departure into the world 'out there' may be available through the study of genres. Genres are classifications that can be defined as 'systems of orientations, expectations, and conventions that bind together an industry, performers, critics, and

fans in making what they identify as a distinctive sort¹⁴ of symbolic objects. Genres play a role at all stages of the cultural process: creators communicate with each other in the language of genres; producers refer to genre categories in order to manage the selection, production and marketing of content; retailers organize shelf space according to generic classifications; reviewers judge symbolic objects against their respective genre backdrop; consumers establish their identities through their interest and disinterest in different genres. Consumers may aspire to or be ascribed a social status that is attributed to a genre, and engage with symbolic objects in ways that are often highly conventional. While genre conventions inform and are reproduced by the behavior of creators, producers and consumers, they are also used to translate the meanings and values that one group (e.g. film producers) ascribes to a certain type of content that will be evaluated by another group (e.g. film critics). This way, genre distinctions allow symbolic content to be passed incrementally from creators to consumers, with meaning and values added to (and subtracted from) symbolic objects at every stage. These genre processes from creation to reception may be gradual, and not necessarily straight in their transformation.¹⁵

7▼

Richard Peterson and his next-generation collaborators became very interested in the institutionalization of genres. Similar to his article on the rise of rock, Peterson's book *Creating Country Music* first details the constellation of the six 'facets' of the musical production system which in 1920s America allowed untrained white musicians and songwriters to make a living from what was then regarded as 'music for morons' by the middle-class urbanites who dominated the music industry.¹⁶ Within this framework, however, Peterson also considers questions of sound, performance, dress, and the value of 'country' within the logics of its reproduction. For instance, a later interpretation of 'authentic' country – the honky-tonk style which became popular after the Second World War – owed its rougher sound and more explicit lyrics to the performance setting of the Southwestern roadhouses. Due to lack of funds and space, these venues required smaller bands. These had to play louder as they performed for noisy, mostly male audiences that drank rather than danced, and addressed this audience with songs about lust and women's infidelity. Such topics were at the time banned from radio and dance halls, but eventually reached a larger public via records. The link between the local concert setting and the record industry were the many jukeboxes which were present in large numbers in venues where honky-tonk bands played and fed with the coins of the same audience. Click counters were installed into these boxes and registered how often each record side had been selected. This created a 'market information regime' that provided record producers with data about a demand for a particular kind of music.¹⁷

In this example, Peterson demonstrates how conventions first formed in a 'live' encounter between musicians and audiences and then became institutionalized as a genre that structured the production and consumption of the music beyond its original setting. The claim is that genres can form within as well as outside the industry environment. Jennifer C. Lena, a next-generation collaborator with Peterson, makes this case explicit in her study of music genres. She analyzes how some genres, such as funk, emerge from an industry-based locale, while others evolve from avant-garde based groups of local musicians. While she implies that there are common progressions through which genres evolve, the establishment and potential ossification of genres occur through social-structural processes that rely on creators, industry insiders, and fans.¹⁸ Both Peterson and Lena widen the scope of the production perspective, stating that 1) symbolic meanings attributed to content matter in both production and consumption, and 2) the production and consumption of symbolic content can be studied empirically through an examination of genres.



3. The Production of Culture Perspective in Contemporary History: Remarks on a Possible Agenda

To conclude with the practical benefit of the production perspective for research in contemporary history, we would like to highlight two points:

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3.1. *The contingency of cultural change.* Our presentation urges historians to study the actors, structures and processes of content production, a topic that has so far received only scant interest in the discipline. This is surprising, as historians would not dispute the importance of this topic per se. But as a rule, it is referred to rather vaguely with terms like 'the media' or 'the cultural industries'. As historians rarely treat the production of culture as a phenomenon *sui generis*, they tend to reduce it to a reflection of society or a reaction to demand, suggesting that content providers execute a 'Zeitgeist' or respond to given needs of recipients. As a result, cultural change appears to be a mere imprint of developments which are set in motion by big events, greater societal trends, or discourses. The production perspective challenges the consequentiality which is implied by this oversight. By taking into account the inherent dynamics of symbol production, the particular conditions it is subjected to, and the agency of the actors involved in the fabrication of content, it stresses the contingency of cultural change.

This contingency requires historians to study the organization of content production and the practices of the actors involved both in detail and comprehensively. As a start, studies on work and workers in content production, on forms of employment, occupational careers, and professionalization are required – 'classic' topics of social and economic history which have not, however, been studied in the sphere of cultural production. More research is also needed on the history of individual companies as well as cultural industries as a whole. This is a topic for economic and business historians who have only begun to approach it.¹⁹ Concerning the legal and regulatory conditions of cultural production, copyright is an object of study of fundamental importance.²⁰ The same applies to the history of market or audience research, which has – given the divide between production and consumption – acquired a pivotal position in cultural production where it contributes to the construction of audiences.²¹ At first sight, cultural and social historians may wonder why they should have to know about such particularities. The answer is that these interrelated facets of modern cultural production are parts of the puzzle why particular sets of symbolic objects appeared at particular points in time. As the production approach shoos away the 'Zeitgeist', it leaves researchers with the task of taking the particular findings of legal, economic, business and media history and integrating them in order to explain change of cultural repertoires.

3.2. *The social effects of cultural production.* Given the inherent dynamics of cultural production, symbolic objects come into view not as representations, but as factors of social life. This brings us to the second point we want to highlight: the relevance of the production perspective for social history. Pointing out the problems of the assumption that symbolic objects and society are mutually connected, we have a) stressed the fundamental divide between the two spheres and b) made a case for the genre concept as an alternative link between culture and society. As genres are defined as bundles of conventions, the analysis of their institutionalization makes apparent that they work as meaningful categories which structure the production as well as the reception of content. In respect to the demand side, genres are social classifications which define groups of cultural consumers. They introduce distinctions into the general audience and make visible an ever growing number of 'subcultures', 'scenes' and 'lifestyle tribes' that are attributed status and certain social traits. We assume that these social groups owe their sustained presence not least to a continuous differentiation and institutionalization of genres.

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Progressive rock, which emerged in the mid-1960s from an interplay of young musicians, record producers, music writers and other intermediaries, may serve as an example. It established a distinction between a mainstream of deluded followers of the latest fad and a group of conscious, 'earnest' recipients of valuable and 'progressive', yet popular music. As it rewarded the artistic aspirations of its creators and offered categories to interpret music in a certain way, the genre gave it a social and political relevancy and provided incentives for critical engagement. The existence of this new attitude towards popular music has been described by historians as an expression of a youth movement which was boosted by the 'cultural industries' as either its ally or its usurper.²² It seems worthwhile to complement this research with studies which are more specific about the way the raw materials of progressive rock were processed by gatekeepers of music production and

shaped into a discernible genre. This would have, firstly, implications for the chronology, as it shifts the focus from the political event of '1968' to structural changes in the music, advertising and film businesses which contributed to the rise of rock and preceded 1968 by five to ten years.²³ Secondly, it would explain why 'progressive' music appealed primarily to the better educated members of the middle class, while working class youth turned towards disco, a genre without an intellectual superstructure. This polarization within the young audience of popular music owed much to the specific ways the two genres were formed.

The production perspective brings into view the institutionalization of cultural and social distinctions as an influential factor in the development of modern societies. As it negates the immediate correspondence between the production and the reception of culture, the perspective avoids the familiar narrative of a struggle between the providers of culture aiming for control on the one side and audiences and creators who strive for autonomy on the other. It substitutes the circular encoding/decoding model and 'top-down' dichotomy that form the core of this narrative with linear, open-ended, decentralized and self-referential processes of meaning production which, given that the resulting genres resonate with audiences, created social structures for producers and consumers alike.



Notes:

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Most important publications:

Evolutions in the Literary Field: The Co-constitutive Forces of Cognitions, Institutions, and Networks, in: Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung 36 (2011) 3, pp. 115-135

Decision Making, Market Logic, and the Rating Mindset: Negotiating BookScan in the Field of U.S. Trade Publishing, in: European Journal of Cultural Studies 15 (2012), pp. 604-620

(with Noah E. Friedkin) Cultural Production and Consumption: The Social Construction of Meaning in Book Clubs, in: American Sociological Review 77 (2012), pp. 45-68

(April 2013)



Citation Recommendation:

Klaus Nathaus/C. Clayton Childress, The Production of Culture Perspective in Historical Research: Integrating the Production, Meaning and Reception of Symbolic Objects, in: Zeithistorische Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History, Online-Ausgabe, 10 (2013), H. 1, URL: <http://www.zeithistorische-forschungen.de/16126041-Nathaus-Childress-1-2013>

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