



Theory of Media and Cultural Consumption

<i>Course type</i>	Lecture	<i>Semester</i>	Summer semester 2010/11
<i>Lecturer</i>	Roland Benedikter	<i>Teaching language</i>	English
<i>Study regulations</i>	old (509/99) and new (270/04)		
<i>Lecture hours</i>	30 (see timetable)	<i>Credit points</i>	5
<i>Office hours</i>	20 (see timetable)	<i>Scientific field</i>	SPS/08

Course description

What role do new media like Facebook, Twitter, mobile phones, iPads or webcams play in the (post-)modern open societies of today? How and to what extent are they starting to impact the social and political sphere also in non-democratic societies (which are still the majority in the currently arising "world civilization") - as the revolutionary events in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya or Bahrain seem to have impressively shown in the first months of 2011?

What is on the other hand the cultural and anthropological meaning of new, rather individuality-oriented simulation worlds like "Second Life"? And why has the computer games industry become one of the 10 most important high-tech branches in the world? Is Facebook really a "new country" with 600 million citizens, and is it really worth 50 billion dollars, given that in the strict sense nothing is (economically) "produced" by it?

If Internet-based avantgardistic pedagogical projects of governments like the "World Wide Telescope" are used in cooperation with private enterprises like Microsoft as tools of propaganda for preparing the expansion of humanity into space, is it good or bad that the global imaginary is increasingly "embedded" mediatically into political and economic goals and interests? And if the contemporary journalism is on the one hand increasingly "embedded" into political and military events, and on the other hand "fictionalized", i.e. transformed into a not strictly factual story-telling in order to counter the growing importance of live media like webcams and cell phone videos: How can we still believe what the media tell us? Is Wikileaks really the exception here, the "pure truth", and is it really an agent of progressive social change?

More importantly: How are all these phenomena related to what we call, in an equally highly ambivalent way, "cultural consumption"? Is the latter still simply "the consumption of culture" (like since the 1970s), or does it have to be re-defined today as a specific "cultural" way of consumption (for example in the sense of sustainability)? What role does technology play at the center of the complex overall interweavement between new media and social change, i.e. within the dialectics between empowerment and assimilation that is enacted by the ascent of new techno- and media-philic ideologies like "Transhumanism" or Neurotechnology? And last but not least, what does all that mean for the foreseeable evolution of the globalized culture of the 21st century as a whole?

Many questions, all of them as fundamentally important as they are radically open. As at yet, clear answers seem to be difficult to find, given that the whole field is in full motion, if not mobilization. One thing is certain though: Without any doubt, we live in the era in which *human attention* becomes the most important resource and the most widely traded economic good in the world. The rapid ascent of the "attention



economy" becoming the most important global industry is indicating this trend. So why do most of the terms and concepts, with which the contemporary social sciences are trying to address this development, still remain contradictory and torn? Do they maybe mirror the fact that the core significance of culture today is to be productively ambivalent? Or are we simply still not appropriately prepared to deal with the new level of "deep ambivalence" which will characterize the virtualized high-tech culture of the coming decades?

In order to elucidate some aspects of these questions, we will try to start from some basics:

1) A "medium" is, as the usual definition goes, an "extension of man" (McLuhan) or a "transporter". It extends and/or transports something between two poles, and it is the intermediate object between two "I"s. The concept of "medium" is thus in many cases used in analogy with the concept of "technology", and even with the term of "prosthesis". In our times though, media are becoming something from outside the human self to something that is increasingly located inside the human being: in the form of "inversive" technology, they invade the human body as well as the social sphere. They are becoming something "trans- or even meta-social". The social and cultural sphere is in the midst of a fundamental change, which marks a crucial dimension of the turn from the 20th into the 21st century: The Media invade and transform the human sphere both from the outside (social practice) and from the inside (human body, self-concept of the human being). The human being is in the process of becoming a hybrid being that blends with technology; and so is the "natural" world. And technology combined with media and demography becomes a leading cultural force not only in the West, but worldwide. In this situation, the new question today becomes: To what extent am I myself, and want to be myself, and to what extent do I want to be "another" one, or even emphatically "the other"? Am I what I am, or am I what I still have to become, not least by the transformative and narrative help of the media? And how do I interpret myself through the media and through my specific cultural consumption connected with them? These questions are not mainly philosophical or psychological anymore, but have become physical in the most literal sense. Will the "I" as we have known it survive this process? Or will it implode? And if yes: towards what?

2) "Culture" comes from the Latin word "cultivare", which means "to take care of something", to "cultivate" something, i.e. to transform something that is non-human (including nature) into something human, and thus to insert it into the social and societal spheres. In the strict sense, culture seen/regarded as the invisible sphere that carries values and practices over time can be defined as "the transferable of social practice" or as "the inheritable of how a society is" (Johannes Heinrichs). Some practices connected with the new media as "extensions of human" seem to confirm this, others seem to contradict it. If, for example, webcams and other interactive live streams on the Internet allow us to assist at virtually every event in the world in the very moment it is occurring, what does this ultimately mean? Is it according to the idealistic media theory of Bert Brecht: allowing the free individual to be present first-hand at every crucial event of humanity worldwide, e.g. without any commentaries or cuts? Or is it in the end distracting the individual, taking her or him virtually away from her from her or his concrete, local environment and the specific, concrete tasks connected with it? Is global democratization through access to information rather a political or a cultural task (China!)? In late 2010, Hillary Clinton propagated as the new macro-strategy of the US for the years to come: "Leading through civilian power" (meant: leading through the model of Western cultural consumption). But to what extent is that not only a political strategy of supremacy, but also a sustainable cultural vision? These seem to be crucial, if not constitutive parts of the current "global systemic shift", since they touch the issue of global social change at its very cultural and (thus at least potentially also) trans-civilizational core.

3) We live in an age of multiplying environmental and social (including economic and financial!) crises that urge us to further evolve our life styles towards responsibility, connectivity and personal commitment.



"Consumption" is in this situation a term that seems to be antiquated to many. Nevertheless, it still remains the most appropriate term of how we concretely behave most of the time in the nod between media and technology. Maybe today we are "consumers" more than ever before, and on a much higher problem level than before. But should we remain "consumers" of technological culture, or do we have to become "cultural users" of technology? As Paul Ehrlich has pointed out, "cultural evolution becomes always more essential in preventing a global collapse of society. We are not going to solve the gigantic problems humanity faces without a real change in culture and behaviour. We (have) got to have cultural evolution, so that we start to treat each other and the environment on which we all depend much better. So it's a matter of behavioural change".¹ And given the increasing impact of the new media and technologies on our daily life behaviour: How could we possibly concretely manage the transition from the first to the second notion of "cultural consumption" through a more responsible use of the new media?

It is obvious that all these questions are interrelated. The one decisive question at the point of overlapping of all other questions is probably becoming: How can we find a reasoned balance between the positive mystification (modernists, for example Alvin Toffler) and the negative mystification (post-humanists, for example Martin Heidegger) of this process, consisting of an increasing mixture between mediatic, cultural and technological issues? Is a balanced paradigmatic position possible at all, given the outstanding quality of the problem level?

The lecture discusses aspects of these questions. It analyzes core dimensions of the current transformational impact of media and cultural consumption on (post-)modern societies in the (twi)light of the fundamental, but dialectically productive ambivalence they are opening up. Given that there is a deep, evolving ambivalence of synchronically and diachronically multilayered facets which is more complex and settled on a higher level than the simple two-dimensional clarity of the "modernity" based ideologies of "left" and "right", we will have to proceed by a phenomenological method of "deep narration" (Clifford Geertz). This means we will first of all look as directly as possible at the phenomena and then try to describe them, and only afterwards will we find and/or forge analytic terms appropriate to their nature and process. In co-prepared presentations with the lecturer, the students will self-explore crucial issues and present them to each other, accompanied and stimulated by organized responding talks, introductory and summarizing lectures by the lecturer and structured in-depth discussions about selected topics of key symptomatic value. The active participation of the students in the presentation, analysis and discussion of these topics will be crucial. According to the very nature of the topic addressed, the lecture should be a consciously experimental, lively and open endeavor as in most of my lectures on avantgardistic issues in which the event quality co-depends on the intensity and the level of participation by the students.

Exam procedures

Exam language: English.

Exam mode: Patchwork of: 1) Reading loads, 2) oral group presentation, 3) performance in the seminar, 4) final oral examination.

¹ Ehrlich, P. 2009: 'Culture, Behaviour and the Future of Humanity'. In: 'Stanford's Paul Ehrlich wins environmental award in Spain', by J. Weaver. Stanford Report, November 5. <http://news.stanford.edu/news/2009/november2/ehrllich-environmental-award-110509-html>.



Preparatory Reading, Presentations and Manuscript: Until the start of the lecture on May 12, 2011, all students will read 6 texts listed in the reading pool. Of these, 3 should be of section "A", 3 of section "B". Among those of section "A", preference should be given to the texts: "Die Aufmerksamkeitsökonomie. Perspektiven einer neuen Wirtschaftsform" (as far as the participants master reading German), and "The Future of the Self-Image of the Human Being". Among those of Section "B", preference should be given to the texts marked by an asterisk. The material for the group presentations (videos, photographs, audio material etc.) will be partly handed out by the lecturer, partly researched autonomously by the students. It is essential that all participants dispose of their own original manuscript of all the ongoings of the lecture, including presentations and discussions.

Final Examination: The final examination consists of a talk of 20 minutes approximately, in which the students

1. should critically review their own presentation, as well as those of their colleagues;
2. render the contents of the lecture, including case studies, examples and discussions;
3. give account of their reading experiences;
4. develop a critical stance toward the current phenomena related to media and cultural consumption able to embrace these phenomena and to deal with their specific multi-facetedness and fundamental ambivalence.

The final grade will be the combination of 1) reading, 2) oral group presentation, 3) performance in the seminar, 4) final oral examination.

Reading pool:

N.B.: All the following texts are available in the university library or on the Internet. If some of them should temporarily unavailable, please contact the lecturer.

Section "A" (texts by the lecturer)

1. * Roland Benedikter: Die Aufmerksamkeitsökonomie. Perspektiven einer neuen Wirtschaftsform. In: Roland Benedikter (Hg.): Buchreihe Postmaterialismus – Die zweite Generation, Band 2: Der Mensch, Wien 2001, S. 41-74.
2. Roland Benedikter: Mein Augen im Leben des anderen. Webcams - die Zukunft des Fernsehens? In: Mensch. Beiträge für morgen. 2. Jahrgang, Nr. 3, Frankfurt am Main 2002, S. 17-27.
3. Roland Benedikter: Das Problem der Fernseherinnerung. In: Das Goetheanum, 84. Jahrgang, Nr. 6/2005. 06.02.2005, Basel 2005, S. 8.
4. Roland Benedikter: Oliver North und Jayson Blair. Oder: Journalismus zwischen „Einbindung“ und Fiktionalisierung. Anmerkungen zu einer zweifachen Tendenz in der „postmodernen“ Mediensphäre. In: Studia Germanica Universitatis Vesprimiensis, Universitätsverlag Veszprem und Edition Präsens. Jahrgang 9 (2005), Heft 1/2005, Veszprem und Wien 2005, S. 5-34.
5. Roland Benedikter: Der Fall Microsoft, oder: Wirtschaftsleben zwischen Individualität und Sozialität. In: Kulturzeitschrift „Die Drei“. 70. Jahrgang, Nr. 9/2000. Stuttgart 2000, S. 7-23.
6. Roland Benedikter: Adidas gegen Nike, oder: Drei Streifen gegen zwei Hörner. Sport und seine protosakralen Symbole. In: Kulturzeitschrift Info3. Frankfurt am Main. 21. Jahrgang, Heft 7-8/1998. Frankfurt am Main 1998, S. 23-27.
7. Politische Subjektivierung. Gestalt und Aufgabe einer zeitgemäßen Kulturpolitik zwischen Moderne und Postmoderne. In: Aufklärung und Kritik. Zeitschrift für freies Denken und humanistische Philosophie. Herausgegeben von der Gesellschaft für kritische Philosophie Nürnberg. 10. Jahrgang, Heft 1/2003. Nürnberg 2003, S. 66-91.
8. * Roland Benedikter: The Future of the (Self-)Image of the Human Being in the Age of Transhumanism, Neurotechnology and Global Transition. In: Futures. The Journal for Policy, Planning and Futures Studies. Volume 41: Special issue "Global Mindset Change" (ed. J. Gidley). Elsevier 2010 (together with J. Giordano and



K. Fitzgerald).

9. Roland Benedikter: Wer ist der „rettende Gott“? Das Doppelantlitz der Technik am Beginn des 21. Jahrhunderts. In: Kulturzeitschrift „Die Drei“. 72. Jahrgang, Heft 8-9/2002. Frankfurt am Main 2002, S. 53-74.
10. Roland Benedikter: Die Wiedergeburt des Menschlichen aus dem Geist der Technik? Selbstexpansion der Technik und Aufstieg der individuellen moralischen Intuition. In: Roland Benedikter (Hg.): Italienische Technikphilosophie für das 21. Jahrhundert. Reihe Problemata, Band 145. Frommann-Holzboog Verlag, Stuttgart 2002, S. 123-151.

Section „B“ (Texts by other authors)

1. Theodor W. Adorno: Prolog zum Fernsehen. In: Eingriffe. Neun kritische Modelle, Frankfurt am Main 1963, S. 69-80.
2. Theodor W. Adorno und Max Horkheimer: Dialektik der Aufklärung, Frankfurt am Main 1969.
3. Jean Baudrillard: The Consumer Society. Myths and Structures, London 1998.
4. * Nick Bostrom: The Future of Humanity, 2007. In: <http://www.nickbostrom.com/papers/future.pdf>, Oxford University.
5. * Nick Bostrom: Technological Revolutions: Ethics and Politics in the Dark, 2006. In: <http://www.nickbostrom.com/revolutions.pdf>, Oxford University.
6. * Bertolt Brecht: Radiotheorie. Der Rundfunk als Kommunikationsapparat. In: Bertolt Brecht: Gesammelte Werke in 20 Bänden. Bd. 18, Frankfurt am Main, S. 127–134.
7. Martin Heidegger: „Nur noch ein Gott kann uns retten“. Spiegel-Interview mit Martin Heidegger. In: Der Spiegel, 31. Mai 1976.
8. * Wolfram Hirsching: Free Software. Das Dämmern einer weltweiten „Kultur des Schenkens“ in der Hacker-Kultur des Internet - ein Ansatz zur postmaterialistischen Selbsttranszendierung des Kapitals? In: Roland Benedikter (Hg.): Postmaterialismus, Band 5: Das Kapital, Wien 2005.
9. * Bill Joy: Why the Future doesn't need us. In: Wired, New York 2000, <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/8.04/joy.html>.
10. * Adam Keiper: The Age of Neuroelectronics. In: The New Atlantis, Number 11, Winter 2006, pp. 4-41, <http://www.thenewatlantis.com/archive/11/keiper.htm>.
11. Donald Matheson: Media discourses. Analysing media texts, London 2005.
12. * Herbert Marshall McLuhan: Understanding media: The extensions of man, London 2001.
13. * Herbert Marshall McLuhan: The Medium is the message, London 1967.
14. * Sherry Turkle: Life on the Screen. Identity in the Age of the Internet, New York 1997.
15. * Paul Virilio: Cyberwelt, die wesentlich schlimmste Politik, Berlin 2011.
16. Paul Virilio: Information und Apokalypse, München und Wien 2000.
17. Noah Wardrip-Fruin et. al. (ed.): The New Media Reader, MIT Press Cambridge 2003.
18. * Kevin Warwick: The Matrix – our future? Reading 2003. In: http://whatisthematrix.warnerbros.com/rl_cmp/new_phil_warwick.html.
19. Slavoj Žižek: Looking Awry. An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture, MIT Press Cambridge 1992.