Introduction: “Culture is Ordinary”

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Students new to English Studies at Göttingen University are often surprised to notice that their course of study does not only refer to Literature (with a capital L) but also takes other kinds of cultural production and all sorts of cultural and literary theories into consideration.

“Culture is ordinary”: In 1958, when Raymond Williams made his programmatic statement in an essay of the same title, the relations between culture, society, and class were being renegotiated and redefined, and Williams had some impact on the direction in which the discussion would move. Williams’s thinking was influenced by Marxist theory. To him, the system of production in any given society was the key to understanding the culture – or cultures – that exist in that society. Thus, economic changes affect the social organisation that he perceived art to be an element of (93). Williams, however, did not believe that to bring about social changes a particular approach to the arts should be taken; culture, he insisted, “is common meanings, the product of a whole people, and offered individual meanings, the product of a man’s whole committed personal and social experience” (96). His 1958 essay discusses Marxist theory and Williams’s responses to it, but it also looks at the standpoint of F. R. Leavis, perhaps the most important English author on culture in the first half of the twentieth century. Leavis rejected the consequences the growing industrialisation had on what he considered culture, something that “has always been in minority keeping” (1930, 3), and that contains the “power of profiting by the finest human experiences from the past” (1930, 5). He made a distinction between high culture and low culture, and for him the advent of mass media marked a sharp decline in cultural products. To Williams, this made

little sense. He believed that ordinary people should not, and indeed cannot, be equated with the mindless masses that Leavis envisioned. Nor did Williams believe in the stipulated downfall of culture as a whole; culture expands, he contended, and all elements of culture are also expanding, so it quite logically follows that more 'bad' culture would be noticed (100).

F. R. Leavis's ideas about the necessity of preserving the continuity of English (high) culture date from the early 1930s, a time when the relationship between culture and national heritage was discussed not only in England, but all over Europe. In one of his most important contributions on the subject, *Culture and the Environment*, he mourned the death of a particular kind of society:

What we have lost is the organic community with the living culture it embodied. Folk-songs, folk-dances, Cotswold cottages and handicraft products are signs and expressions of something more: an art of life, a way of living, ordered and patterned, involving social arts (1964, 1).

Like Williams, Leavis noticed changes in society – *Culture and Environment* alone contains two chapters on the loss of 'organic' communities – , but his reaction was different from what Williams's would be some thirty years later. For Leavis, literary education – "training taste and sensibility" (1964, 1) – was to replace what had been lost. *Culture and the Environment* was followed up by his study on *The Great Tradition* (1948) in which Leavis charted the development of what he considered as the tribute of English novelists to culture: The novelists he singled out were, or so he stated, "significant in terms of the human awareness they promote; awareness of the possibilities of life" (2). Closely bound up with this was the authors' take on morality: "Without her intense moral preoccupation [Jane Austen] wouldn't [sic] have been a great novelist." (7) To Leavis, Literature (with a capital L) should serve mankind as a beacon, but the literature (with a small l) that was produced in Leavis's own lifetime was obviously more of a will-o'-the-wisp instead.

Leavis was not the only one uneasy about the relationship between art, culture, and society in the context of the mass production of works of art in the first half of the twentieth century; in fact, it was a common concern of many critics, and it covered not only literature. Walter Benjamin, like Williams influenced by Marxist thinking, also believed that art and economic conditions reflect on each other's changes and developments. Benjamin noted that the 'truth' of a work of art – its 'aura', in Benjamin's terms – changes, and to a certain extent degenerates, when it is mechanically (re)produced. Thus, the reproduction of a work of art results in the shakeup of tradition ("Erschütterung des Tradierten", 477), and Benjamin recognised the then modern medium of film as its prime agent. Partly this was triggered by the Nazi's and Mussolini's use of propaganda films. Yet to Benjamin, films were only the final stage in a more general and sweeping development in the mechanisation of art production. Unlike the production of a theatre play, a film is less 'realistic', or so Benjamin claims; getting used to this representation of the world results

in an audience that is mentally numbed and unused to critical thinking. For Benjamin, thinking along similar lines as Leavis, this meant the downfall of human civilisation.

Leavis's concern with high and low culture, and his belief that those who are more interested in low cultural products should be educated to understand how to mentally better themselves, influenced many critics of his time, though not everyone agreed with him on what should be done to remedy the situation. In the end a new kind, non-Leavis kind of literary and cultural criticism emerged. Authors like Richard Williams and Richard Hoggart – and others – critically reviewed these earlier ideas and found them wanting, creating a new kind of approach to literature and to culture in general: Cultural criticism is not interested in a high/low culture divide, but is concerned with all cultural products, in whatever form they come. Cultural critics do not study excellence in a particular author or genre but approach a stratum of cultural products in the way an anthropologist approaches an alien culture, as something to be evaluated and understood without prejudice and without hierarchies in mind. Even the production of films and books for a mass audience is considered in a different light, and while many critics are still trained in using Marxist thinking for assessing the impact of cultural artefacts on their recipients the commodification of the artefacts is not be universally condemned any more.

The papers in this volume reflect this change of topics. None is concerned with 'literature' in a traditional sense; even Tonia Kröger's paper on Shakespeare does not take his work into account, but rather studies how critics have tried to grasp Shakespeare as an author and how they defended their idea of who really filled Shakespeare's shoes. While this may seem very arcane, these 'Shakespeare wars' show how irrelevant the author's person really is when studying his work: The very range of authors and politicians who were and are still considered to have used 'Shakespeare' as a pseudonym effectively debunks the notion that Shakespeare's plays can be understood better (or even only) if the life of the author is taken into account.

War is also the background to two other papers, Madita Oeming's "Vietnam Goes Intermedia" and Dennis Edelmann's paper on two contemporary films on the American military intervention in Afghanistan ("The 'War on Terror'"). Oeming is primarily interested in how a very particular text, Michael Herr's book about his experience as a journalist in the Vietnam War, tries to show the reality of life in a warzone both by using its own medium – the core of the book is formed by articles Herr published in various magazines – and by reflecting various other media such as films. At the same time, many readers of *Dispatches* would also see the book against the backdrop of other war books. Edelmann, on the other hand, moves away from literature in the sense of printed texts completely. He analyses the representation of the US 'war on terror' in two recent films, Ridley Scott's *Body of Lies* and Jeffrey Nachmaninoff's *Traitor* (both 2008). The phrase 'war on terror'

seems unanimously positive; it indicates that it is legitimate to destroy the enemy not because he is an enemy, but because he is a terrorist. For German audiences, the distinction between the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ side in a conflict is usually not clear-cut, for reasons of German twentieth-century history. For an American audience, this is different. Edelmann’s study shows how the two films illustrate a change in the American way of thinking by analysing how ‘the enemy’ is depicted both visually and acoustically.

Finally, Lennart Brieger’s paper also looks at the depiction of a conflict about world views, though it is on a relatively small scale. Tim Minchin’s *Storm* was originally a beat poem which was turned into an animated movie in 2009, available both online and on DVD. *Storm*’s speaker recounts a discussion at a dinner party, and though this does not sound as if anything very controversial could have taken place, the movie illustrates very clearly how argumentative the speaker gradually becomes. Brieger is mainly interested in how the speaker tries to win the reader/viewer/listener over to his side, which strategies he uses to make the reader/viewer/listener identify with his views. To this end, Brieger also looks at various ideas of how identity is constructed both on the side of the speaker and of that of the recipient.

None of these papers confirms to a traditional notion of literary criticism, and questions of high and low culture are not directly touched upon. Instead, they all consider various cultural productions which also include texts, and which aim at a broad audience. Together they illustrate how various conflicts both shape the view *of* the contestants and shape the audience’s views *on* the contestants, and in this they give an insight into how society tries to come to terms with the conflicts: The authors of these papers show their readers various “deepe things out of darke-nesse” – “yea, who knoweth not such things as these?” (Job 12:22; 5)

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