

COMMUNICATING CULTURE: Micro-reader

The function of this sub-section is entirely pragmatic: to offer a series of short texts of the kind of length and demand as those which will introduce Section A of the COMM3 exam. The topics addressed and content covered should not be seen as representative guide to “the aspects of contemporary culture” that this unit promises to cover. However, that said, they do all address ‘aspects of contemporary culture’.

The focus here is rather on form, style and function, on establishing how such passages are to be used within and without the context of the exam. As we suggested earlier the best way to make the analysis of reasonably complex short texts in an exam comprehensible is to see the exam format also as a gentle model of good classroom practice. When you look at the reading required for the compulsory question in Section A you are looking in a concentrated form at the interrogation of and discussion about a short theoretical text followed by a couple of arguments that arise from this (for further discussion).

It is part of the integrated character of your Communication and Culture course that it makes a genuine attempt to develop the skills you will need alongside the development of content and concepts. In AS coursework, for example, you moved from 500 words of personal critical response to 1000 words which included the critical opinions of others: both of these provided a gradual movement towards the more academic demands of your A2 Case Study. In the same way the short answers in the AS exam which moved from supporting arguments to engaging in debates were also a preparation for this. The COMM3 exam, like the COMM4 Case Study which ‘jogs’ alongside it, asks you to consider both primary and secondary

sources: first-hand accounts of theory and practice alongside responses to these. If you use this section in the way that it's intended this random collection of primary sources will prompt secondary responses of your own.

Here then is a 'micro-reader' with at least three functions:

- To prompt an ongoing debate around 'aspects of contemporary culture'
- In doing so to offer implicit preparation for Section A and its requirement that texts be addressed, and through them issues
- By its eclectic mix to encourage teachers and students alike to provide their own.

Each extract comes with a vaguely descriptive title and a set of questions/prompts. They are starting points for discussions and debates, since their function is to be a stimulus. Remember that the key words used in the Section A specification are "analyse" and "evaluate". Also remember that what they are principally intending to 'stimulate' is your understanding of Key concepts (see the 'map' on page) and theoretical approaches (see page), The extracts here are chiefly academic and un-illustrated, though there are examples of the journalistic and visual to remind us that the specification talks of "a stimulus material comprising written or written and visual material". The extracts are grouped around the following themes which reflect 'aspects of contemporary culture' but which are not intended in any sense to provide an exhaustive or authoritative division of this 'topic':

- High and low
- Cultural practice
- National identity
- Globalisation
- Knowledge and power

High and Low: reflections on the state of the debate.

Extract 1: The character and status of High 'art'

Paul Willis: Common Culture

The institutions and practices, genres and terms of high art are currently categories of exclusion more than of inclusion. They have no real connection with most young people or their lives. They may encourage some artistic specialisations but they certainly discourage much wider and more general symbolic creativity. The official existence of the 'arts' in institutions seems to exhaust everything else in its artistic contexts. If some things count as 'art', the rest must be 'non-art'. Because 'art' is in the 'art gallery', it can't therefore be anywhere else. It is that which is special and heightened, not ordinary and everyday.

The arts establishment, by and large, has done little to dispel these assumptions. It prefers instead to utilise or even promote fears of cultural decline and debasement in order to strengthen its own claims for subsidy, institutional protection and privilege. In general the arts establishment connives to keep alive the myth of the special, creative individual artist holding out against passive mass consumerism, or helping to maintain a self-interested view of élite creativity.

- In what specific ways might “the institutions and practices, genre and terms” of high culture exclude rather than include?
- What does Willis consider it to be the most significant negative implications of having a clearly defined 'high art' “in the art gallery”?
- What do you understand by “the myth of the special creative individual artist”?
- If we were each to draw up lists of 'art' and 'non-art' what factors might explain 'the differences between individual lists'.

EXTRACT 2: The irremediable badness of Mass Culture.

Dwight MacDonald

There are theoretical reasons why Mass Culture is not and can never be any good. I take it as axiomatic that culture can only be produced by and for human beings. But in so far as people are organised (more strictly, disorganised) as masses, they lose their human identity and quality. For the masses are in historical time what a crowd is in space: a large quantity of people unable to express themselves as human beings because they are related to one another neither as individuals nor as members of communities - indeed, they are not related *to each other* at all, but only to something distant, abstract, nonhuman: a football game or bargain sale in the case of a crowd, a system of industrial production, a party or a State in the case of the masses.

- Summarise MacDonald's argument as to why Mass Culture "can never be any good"?
- How far do you agree with this argument? What examples of 'good' Mass Culture would you identify?
- Which theoretical perspectives might be usefully used to both support and refute this view of Mass Culture?

EXTRACT 3: The problem with film

F. R. Leavis:

It applies even more disastrously to the films: more disastrously, because the films have so much more potent influence. They provide now the main form of recreation in the civilised world; and they involve surrender, under conditions of hypnotic receptivity, to the cheapest emotional appeals, appeals the more insidious because they are associated with a compellingly vivid illusion of actual life. It would be difficult to dispute that the result must be serious damage to the 'standard of living' (to use the phrase as before). All this seems so obvious that one is diffident about insisting on it. And yet people will reply by adducing the attempts that have been made to use the

film as a serious medium of art.

- What do you think Leavis means by 'the standard of living'?
- Why and in what ways does Leavis believe that films cause serious damage to this 'standard of living'?
- What arguments might you advance to support the view that film can indeed be used "as a serious medium of art"?
- Comment briefly on the status of film as a medium in contemporary Britain.

EXTRACT 4: Comms and Culture as cultural pollution

The Daily Mail

Now pupils can take an A-level in being a teenager under new exam board plans

(Under the new A-level pupils will explore questions on Ipods and dating)

For anyone who spent two years poring over the intricacies of the War of the Spanish Succession to scrape an A-level in foreign history, it may be best to look away now.

You might have felt duty bound in those days to ration the time you spent shopping, listening to pop music or discussing dates. But there is no such problem for today's teenagers...because they can get a qualification in it.

As part of a controversial A-level in popular culture, pupils will learn about the tradition of kissing in cinemas and ponder such questions as "is skateboarding better than polo?".

The qualification, being offered by the country's biggest exam board from September, also entails a study of celebrity body images and allows pupils to write about clothes and hairstyles.

One assignment requires them to "explore the relationships between

cinema-going and dating" with the aid of source material like The Drifters hit Kissin' in the Back Row of the Movies.

Another asks students to describe the cultural significance of their bedrooms and friends.

The A-level in "communication and culture" is billed by the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance as "excellent preparation" for higher study.

- What assumptions does the article make about culture, and popular culture in particular?
- How might your bedroom have cultural significance?
- How do you respond to this attack on A Level Communication and Culture?

EXTRACT 5: Sub-cultural knowledge

Entwhistle: Class, Culture and Education.

The phrase 'mass culture' conveys emotional overtones of passivity: it suggests someone eating peanuts at a baseball game, and thereby contrasting himself to someone eating canapés at the opening of a sculpture exhibition. The trouble with this picture is that the former is probably part of a better educated audience, in the sense that he is likely to know more about baseball than his counterpart knows about sculpture.

Frye concludes (1967 : 20, 188):'.....in a democracy everybody belongs to some kind of élite, which derives from its social functions a particular knowledge or skill that no other group has'.

- It has been famously stated elsewhere that 'knowledge is power'. Why is this not the case in the example stated here?
- Give a detailed reading of the two situations described in the extract's first sentence in terms of cultural practices and theoretical approaches.
- How do you respond to Frye's assertion that "in a democracy

everybody belongs to some kind of 'élite'?"

EXTRACT 6: The symbolic creativity of everyday life.

Paul Willis: Common Culture

Against this we insist that there is a vibrant symbolic life and symbolic creativity in everyday life, everyday activity and expression - even if it is sometimes invisible, looked down on or spurned. We don't want to invent it or propose it. We want to recognise it - literally recognise it. Most young people's lives are not involved with the arts and yet are actually full of expressions, signs and symbols through which individuals and groups seek creatively to establish their presence, identity and meaning. Young people are all the time expressing or attempting to express something about their actual or potential *cultural significance*. This is the realm of living common culture. Vulgar sometimes, perhaps. But also 'common' in being everywhere, resistant, hardy. Also 'common' in being shared, having things 'in common' includes. 'Art' has been cut short of meanings, where 'culture' has not.

As Raymond Williams always insisted, culture is ordinary. It is the extraordinary in the ordinary, which is extraordinary, which makes both into culture, common culture. We are thinking of the extraordinary symbolic creativity of the multitude of ways in which young people use, humanise, decorate and invest with meanings their common and immediate life spaces and social practices - personal styles and choice of cloths; selective and active use of music, TV, magazines, decoration of bedrooms; the rituals of romance and sub-cultural styles, the style, banter and drama of friendship groups; music-making and dance. Nor are these pursuits and activities trivial or inconsequential. In conditions of late modernisation and the widespread crisis of culture values they can be crucial to the creation and sustenance of individual and group identities, even to cultural survival of identity itself. There is work, even desperate work, in their play.

- In what ways might young people creatively “establish their presence, identity and meanings”?
- What, for Willis, are the differences between ‘Art’ and ‘culture’?
- What might different theoretical approaches (for example Marxism and Post-modernism) make of Willis’ claim that there is “a widespread crisis of cultural values”?

CULTURAL PRACTICE: The significance of everyday life

Ed. Storry and Childs

The following table gives an insight into the cultural life of Britain in the early nineties.

TABLE 0.1 Subjects of conversation between friends and family (1991)

__Subject	% of people who ever talk about subject
—	
Advertising	
2	
Big business	
2	
Bringing up children	26
Clothes and fashion	19
Cost of living	43
Education	
20	
Gardening	
16	
Law and order	16
Neighbours and workmates	21
Politicians	

8	
Religion	
6	
Sport	
25	
Television programmes	
48	
The Government	
19	
Trade Unions	1
Newspaper articles	
19	
Health and welfare services	18
Unemployment	
16	
Personal health	
21	
None of above/don't know	3

__Source: TOM Attitudes to Advertising Survey

- What might you gather about the meanings and practices of everyday life from this information?
- Which of these subjects would you classify as 'cultural'? Explain your criteria for making these judgments
- What further information would you want about the sample used in this research?

EXTRACT 8: Communication and Culture

Du Gay et al

Communication and Culture

Williams placed considerable emphasis on the close connection between culture, meaning and communication. 'Our description of our experience', he argued, 'comes to compose a network of

relationships, and all our communication systems, including the arts, are literally parts of our social organisation' (1961, p.55). The process of exchanging meanings was the same as the building up of relationships and 'the long process of comparison and interaction is our vital associative life' (ibid.) For him, therefore, there was little or no distinction between studying 'the culture' and studying 'society'. He assumed that the cultural meanings and values of society would, broadly speaking, reflect, mirror and express its social and institutional relations: 'Since our way of seeing is literally our way of living, the process of *communication* is in fact the process of *community*: the offering, reception and comparison of new meanings, leading to the tensions and achievements of growth and change' (ibid: emphasis added).

Du Gay et al.

- What do you consider to be the important differences between 'culture' and 'society'?
- In what specific ways might our personal communication express our cultural identities?
- Williams is a Marxist cultural critic. What other theoretical approaches might offer insights into these issues?

EXTRACT 9: Cultural Productions

Paul Willis: Common Culture

We are all cultural producers in some way and of some kind in our everyday lives. It is still often denied or made invisible in many of our official attitudes and practices, in our formal lives and communications. But the necessary symbolic work and symbolic creativity of common culture are now all around us. This book is aimed in part at trying to close the reality gap in our perceptions and understandings, especially for 'youth questions' but also in general. It is certainly true that we can't know where common culture is leading us. It contains many contradictions. But at least our analyses should not be altogether behind the practical realities.

The strengthening, emerging, profane common culture is plural and decentred but nevertheless marks a kind of historical water-shed. There is now a whole social and cultural medium of inter-webbing common meaning and identity-making which blunts, deflects, minces up or transforms outside or top-down communication. In particular, élite or 'official' culture has lost its dominance. It has certainly always been honeycombed with subterranean resistances and alternatives but now the very sense, or pretence, of a national 'whole culture' and of hierarchies of values, activities and places within it is breaking down.

- What is your response to Willis' claims about an "emerging profane common culture"?
- What evidence might there be in suggesting that élite culture "has lost its dominance"?
- What might be the difference between "common culture" and "the sense, or pretence, of a national 'whole culture'"?
- Within what theoretical approach does Willis appear to be working?

EXTRACT : 10

Dick Hebdige: Sub-culture: the meaning of style

Sub-cultural Style

Style in sub-culture is, then, pregnant with significance. Its transformations go 'against nature', interrupting the process of 'normalisation'. As such, they are gestures, movements towards a speech which offends the 'silent majority', which challenges the principle of unity and cohesion, which contradicts the myth of consensus. Our task becomes, like Barthes', to discern the hidden messages inscribed in code on the glossy surfaces of style, to trace them out as 'maps of meaning' which obscurely re-present the very contradictions they are designed to resolve or conceal.

- Hebdige is writing about youth sub-cultures like Punk, what does he say that they do?
- How might, for example, the style of dress of a youth sub-culture 'challenge' "the principle of unity and cohesion" or 'contradict' "the myth of consensus"?
- What might feature on a 'map of meaning' of something like Punk (or Emo or Goth or Hip Hop)?

EXTRACT 11:

Organisational Culture: a map of meaning?

If culture then is defined by the individual and collective experiences, norms and values of people working in an organisation then it is useful to visualise the concept of culture as a recipe. Johnson and Scholes (1989) identified influences that shape an organisation's culture (see figure 1).

- How do you respond to the definition of culture as "the individual and collective experiences, norms and values of people"?
- Give examples of 'Rituals and Myths' in the context of organizational culture.
- Rank the components on the model above.

EXTRACT 12: Graffiti as cultural practice

Graffiti Becomes Art, and Raises its Own Standards

Many graffiti artists ("writers") lament that graffiti is dying, that the old values of originality and respect which kept it moving have been lost. This is not true. Its problems have simply evolved with the medium. Graffiti has become larger, and suffers from what might be called "cultural growing pains." In the early days, graffitiists had to cope with scores of people asking "but is it art?" Nowadays, a glance through

any collection of modern graffiti - such as Art Crimes - will establish certain graffiti as art to all but the most conservative observer. Much of this has to do with a worldwide boom in legally sanctioned spaces for graffiti art in the last ten years.

While some people do not consider any illegal graffiti to be art, few can argue with legally sanctioned work. Graffiti artists have pushed the spray can's technical possibilities to the point where they parallel those of the paintbrush. With its creative possibilities limitless, graffiti now has much more important questions to answer. What, specific to graffiti, makes a good piece? Beyond that, what responsibility does the artist have to the culture, and how does that tie in with making good work?

Sonik

- What evidence suggests that “graffiti is dying”?
- What claims might contemporary graffiti have to be considered art?
- Do you think art should have a social function?

NATIONAL IDENTITY: Under the red, white and blue.

EXTRACT 13: British Culture and the British

Storry and Childs

This is a book about contemporary Britain and British people. On the one hand, Britain is a country with defined boundaries, a recognisable landscape, a long and contentious history, and a position in the various international economic, social and political league tables. On the other hand, British people are much harder to describe. To begin with, some British people do not live in Britain. Furthermore, many people living in Britain do not think of themselves as British.

Nationality is a matter of allegiance and cultural affiliation. Some

people say that your nationality is indicated by where you choose to live or by the team you support at sports events; others say that it is a question of whom you would fight for. It has also been argued that nationality is no longer a powerful force in Britain, that it is simply a matter of circumstance, and that today it is far less significant than local or global identities: relatives, friends and communities are more important to us and so is trans-national culture, such that notions of national identity are both less persuasive and more contentious than they used to be. Above all, nationality is a question of identity and so is crossed by other kinds of identity, such as ethnicity, gender, sexuality, relation, age and occupation.

- In what specific ways might we practise “cultural affiliation”? (what would we do? How would we behave?)
- What is the relationship between nationality and ethnicity?
- Why might national identity have become both “less persuasive and more contentious”/
- Of what might ‘Britishness’ consist?

EXTRACT 14: Becoming British

- According to the display above, how do you become British?
- Comment on the symbolism of the display.

EXTRACT 15: Can't salute you, can't find a flag

Gordon Brown

We should assert that the Union flag by definition is a flag for tolerance and inclusion
Gordon Brown
Chancellor

In the wide-ranging speech, Mr Brown said it is time for the modern Labour party and its supporters to be unashamedly patriotic as, for too long, such feelings have been caricatured as being tied up with right-wing beliefs, when in fact they encompass "progressive" ideas of liberty, fairness and

responsibility.

"Instead of the BNP using it as a symbol of racial division, the flag should be a symbol of unity and part of a modern expression of patriotism too," Mr Brown said.

"All the United Kingdom should honour it, not ignore it. We should assert that the Union flag by definition is a flag for tolerance and inclusion."

The speech to the left-of-centre think-tank included references to the July 4th celebrations in the US and the common practice of many citizens having a flag in their gardens.

"What is our equivalent for a national celebration of who we are and what we stand for?" Mr Brown said.

"And what is our equivalent of the national symbolism of a flag in the United States in every garden?"

- What are the connotations of the Union jack?
- What might be the benefits of having a national day of celebration? When would it be?
- How does national identity work within the United Kingdom?

EXTRACT 16: In search of a national culture

Ed. Storry and Childs

What is the connection between national culture and identity? While culture may be seen as 'lived experience', shared by a community of people who relate to one another through common interests and influences, identity is concerned with how people see themselves, or are seen, in relation to others: as northerners or southerners, football or rugby enthusiasts, opera or blues fans and so on. In short, identity is perhaps two things: who people take themselves to be, and who others take them to be. As the debate in Britain over whether or not to issue national identity cards has shown, questions of national and personal identity are highly complex and contentious.

- How might two contrasting theoretical approaches see the issue of 'national culture'?
- Why might there be a difference sometimes between 'who people take themselves to be and who others take them to be'?
- How can there be a difference between national and personal identity?
- If we were to want an ID card which records identity in C and C terms, what would be recorded/represented on it?

EXTRACT 19: Globalising winds of change?

Anthony Giddens.

Others take a very different position. I'll label them the radicals. The radicals argue that not only is globalisation very real, but that its consequences can be felt everywhere. The global market-place, they say, is much more developed than even in the 1960s and 1970s and is indifferent to national borders. Nations have lost most of the sovereignty they once had, and politicians have lost most of their capability to influence events. It isn't surprising that no one respects political leaders any more, or has much interest in what they have to say. The era of the nation-state is over. Nations, as the Japanese business writer Kenichi Ohmae puts it, have become mere 'fictions'. Authors such as Ohmae see the economic difficulties of the 1998 Asian crisis as demonstrating the reality of globalisation, albeit seen from its disruptive side.

- Marshall McLuhan spoke in the sixties about a shrinking world which he described as 'a global village'. What is the difference between the 'global village' and "the global market-place"?
- The notion that "Nations...have become mere fictions" seems classically post-modernist. What other approaches might you take to the current state of 'nations'?
- What might be the cultural implications of globalisation?

KNOWLEDGE AND POWER: Your life and the power in master words

EXTRACT 20: Meanings and Practices

Du Gay et al

Culture, then, is inextricably connected with the role of *meanings* in society. It is what enables us to 'make sense' of things. But how does this 'meaning-making' work? Partly, we give things meaning by the way we *represent* them, and the principal means of representation in culture is *language*. By language, we do not only mean language in the strict sense of written or spoken words. We mean *any* system of representation - photography, painting, speech, writing, imaging through technology, drawing - which allows us to use signs and symbols to represent or *re-present* whatever exists in the world in terms of a meaningful concept, image or idea. Language is the use of a set of signs or a signifying system to represent things and exchange meaning about them.

- What part does culture play in 'meaning-making'?
- In what ways might "photography, painting, speech, writing, imaging through technology, drawing" constitute 'language'?

EXTRACT 22: Language, culture and existence

Giddens:

The mediation of experience

Virtually all human experience is mediated - through socialisation and in particular the acquisition of language. Language and memory are intrinsically connected, both on the level of individual recall and that of the institutionalisation of collective experience. For human life, language is the prime and original means of time-space distancing, elevating human activity beyond the immediacy of the experience of animals. Language, as Lévi-Strauss says, is a time machine, which

permits the re-enactment of social practices across the generations, while also making possible the differentiation of past, present and future. The spoken word is a medium, a trace, whose evanescence in time and space is compatible with the preservation of meaning across time-space distances because human mastery of language's structural characteristics.

- Consider the relationship between 'socialisation' and 'the acquisition of language'
- What do you think Giddens means by "the institutionalisation of collective experience"?
- Why does Giddens draw a distinction between 'language' and 'the spoken word'?
- How is language a time machine? What are the limitations of this description of language.

EXTRACT 23: Literacy and ideology

Entwhistle (quoting Neil Postman)

The modern radical's view that literacy is dangerous for lower-class children derives from the assumption that a ruling class sees in literacy a means towards controlling the masses as compliant, passive, 'good' citizens and consumers. This point is put vociferously in Postman's essay 'The politics of reading' (1973: 89):

...an important function of the teaching of reading is to make students accessible to political and historical myth. It is entirely possible that the main reason middle-class Whites are so concerned to get lower-class Blacks to read is that Blacks will remain relatively inaccessible to standard-brand beliefs unless and until they are minimally literate. It just may be too dangerous, politically, for any substantial minority of our population *not* to believe that our flags are sacred, our history is noble, our government is representative, our laws are just and our institutions are viable. A reading public by which is meant that it believes most or all of these superstitions, and which is probably why we still have literacy tests for voting (23).

- Postman sees literacy as a vehicle for dominant ideology. Support this view with reference to the ideological nature of language learning and knowledge about language.
- What other means might there be for all Americans (in this case) to 'know': "...our flags are sacred, our history is noble"?
- Do you agree that 'reading' is a conservative force (rather than a radical one)?
- What might other critical theoretical approaches (this one in broadly Marxist) add to this debate?

EXTRACT 24: Cultural norms specified in language

Cranny-Francis:

The first and perhaps most fundamental move in the reassessment of the body was the critique of one of those many dualisms which have structured western thought- the mind/body dualism. This critique has been a feature of politicised writings by feminists as well as by theorists of class and race. Each question the way in which the mind/body dualism - displaced on to dualisms of gender (masculine/feminine), class (middle-class/non middle-class) and race (Anglo/non-Anglo) - reproduces the inequitable valuation of its constituent terms, and results in a powerfully discriminatory conception of the 'normal' body which ensures the cultural dominance of such positioning as 'masculine', 'Anglo', and 'middle-class'; of thought

In this case 'norms' and the 'normal' are to some extent the same but where else is the concept of 'normalisation' a useful one.

Do you think that culture remains dominated by the "masculine", "Anglo" middle-class? How might this be addressed with specific reference to ideas about the 'normal' body?

Hopefully these snippets have modestly opened up a wide-ranging debate about culture, concepts and approaches, which will help the forward movement of the course and its 'meeting with destiny' in the

exam room. These texts are not tests, they are prompts, starting points, launch pads since when we are dealing with contemporary culture we are always, almost literally 'in our element'. The medium very decidedly is the message, or at least part of it and the discussion is open-ended and ongoing.