CMNS 895 - Comprehensive Examinations
Field Definition #2 - **Theorizing Participatory Media, Culture and Art**
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This comprehensive will broadly engage critical theories of art in society, cultural/creative industries, theories of taste, reception, and cycles of production, and art and technology in an historical account of the theory of participation in the arts and media, political economy of art and culture, and theories of power and structure that create the conditions for and modalities of participation in art and cultural practice. Recognizing inevitable problematics embedded in the words of the title of this comprehensive area – "participatory" "media", "culture" and "art" – this comprehensive constitutes a bridge between contemporary popular discourses about participatory media (as it is enframed in literature on digital media) with a number of disparate theories about art, political economy of media, and cultural studies. Contemporary conceptions of "participation", and "media, culture and art" in an era of digital reproduction demand this historical and theoretical grounding.

I begin this history with Heidegger's "The Origin of the Work of Art" (1960), an imaginative recasting of art as transcendent and world-shaping. In developing his philosophy of Being (*Dasein*) around interpretation, perception, and remakings of the World (using ancient monumental art and painting as his examples), Heidegger invokes artistic activities to illustrate the phenomenological character of our experience of the World. Artmaking, through Heidegger's lens, can be applied or generalized to the nature of being in the world more generally. Heidegger's phenomenological vision of being-in-the-world (of which art is one vivid example) is a foundational orientation to contemporary Western conceptions of the special position of art as a mode of creating the world. And while it is true that the transcendent attribution to art pre-dates Heidegger by centuries, I contend that it is his situation of the importance of art *in a phenomenological framework* that has afforded the survivability of the notion of a privileged place for art-in-society, throughout poststructural and postmodernist paradigm shifts.

Theodor Adorno's work on aesthetics (particularly, *Aesthetic Theory*, 1997) offers a comprehensive, dialectical, and materialist basis upon which to refute Heidegger's phenomenologically-informed view. Adorno's view – attached as it is to a more radical philosophical programme – also marks an historic break with prevailing aesthetic theories stemming from idealism (Hegel and Kant). While aesthetics is not the particular subject of this history, Adorno's dialectic between autonomous and socially engaged art practices sets the stage for later Western art discourses as well as those of the sociology of art. It is also notable that Adorno's writing on art utilizes very narrow definitions for art as compared to the work of other scholars in this area. Walter Benjamin (1986), by comparison, entertains a more inclusive definition of art practice, and in so doing opens the way to a reconsideration or inversion of Adorno's dialectic. As with Adorno's thesis, Benjamin's vision of the dialectic between aura and democratic art persists in more recent discourses.

Many twentieth century sociological accounts of art practice and art communities, such as Becker's *Art Worlds* (1982), take a more neutral stance about the role of aesthetics, foregrounding instead the structure of communities of practice and their audiences and the economic dimensions of

creative work. This approach, which has influenced anthropologists (Finnegan 1989) and ethnomusicologists (Nettl 2005) alike has broadly informed methodology in the study of communities of practice. At the same time, theorists such as Bourdieu (1984) have brought a similar orientation to the study of consumption and taste communities. In centering their analyses on the socioeconomic indicators of audience preferences, scholars in this school have (though not without justified criticism – see Zangwill 2002) reaffirmed the the value of relativistic approaches to art without appeal to aesthetic study *per se*. This body of sociology further reinforces an unresolved schism between aesthetics and the study of artists' practice.

Cultural studies – particularly UK cultural studies – attempts to remedy this through its focus on meaning and symbolism in the circulation of art and cultural produce as texts. As evinced in the works of Hall (1980), Hebdige (1979) and McRobbie (1994), this thread of research, heavily informed by semiotics, extends and blends the study of aesthetic form with that of social behaviour, particularly as social performance embodies or enacts gestures of ethnic, gender and socioeconomic relevance.

The "cultural industries approach" to this field, an ongoing provocation by Miege (1989), Garnham (2000), and Hesmondhalgh (2006, 2009), marks a turn in media studies to deliberately, and in many cases quantitatively answer questions about power and structure in the economics of culture while affording more agency to participants of creative spheres than past theorists were willing to do (e.g, Adorno). Something of an uneasy complement to Bourdieu's analysis of taste, in this school of inquiry the focus shifts to forces of production and public policy in creative spheres. The cultural industries approach has been widely influential, drawing in attention from not only cultural economics (Throsby 1994), but also Marxian occupations studies (Menger 1999) and actor-network theory (Hennion 2007).

Much more recently, a resurgence of interest in the economics of creativity has occurred, one which has tried to unseat political economic assumptions about what counts as creative, and comes to very different conclusions about the role of creative occupations in the wider economic system. This "creative industries" critique describes creativity as a force of social action that percolates through a wide range of occupations not normally associated with arts and cultural activities (Potts & Cunningham 2008). Analyses of this species tend to view "creative professionals" as trailblazers that lead economic and social progress. The creative industries critique also provides counterpoint to the statism associated with policymaking inspired by the cultural industries approach (Hesmondhalgh 2009), promoting instead forms of self-organization among creative communities.

While the creative industries approach has met a resounding chorus of critics (Garnham 2005; Miller 2009, to name two), a related body of literature on digital media practice and creativity is also relevant for the present discussion. These authors work to decenter the locus of our notion of creativity in their examinations of the dynamics of fan communities (Jenkins 2004; Baym 2000), social networking platforms (boyd 2008), mobile networks (Ito 2005) and myriad other digital media practices. While these views would underpin the contested claims of the creative industries approach, they constitute yet useful hypotheses that draw attention to the legacy of cultural studies, bringing analysis of symbolism and the circulation of texts back into the debates. A further resonance with the history of criticism I have here outlined is the interest in "world-making" as described by some of this field's proponents (Jenkins *et al* 2003), which revives Heidegger's

invocation of creating of the "world" (in terms of establishing world as an intermediary between sense and perception) as the objective of art. Some critics of these perspectives have attempted to critique the celebration of digital participatory media from a more emphatically *critical* cultural studies-influenced position. Bolter and Grusin (1999) do this by framing digital media as part of a double logic of *remediation*, bridging the Doug Kellner's critical approach to media studies to the actor-network theory of Bruno Latour.

Consideration of this body of works also demands a critical look at one of the fundamental assumptions made about "participation" in art – the theorizing of "participatory" itself. There is a long history to the exploration of the question about what participatory art means, from Breton's writings about Surrealism, through Artaud's reversals of audience-performer dynamics, public Situationist happenings and other public forms of contemporary art. This history of thinking about participation in art is often ignored in contemporary discourses about digital media. Some argue, for instance, that digital media use can and should transform our very notions of aesthetics. Bourriaud's (2002) *relational aesthetics* is one such theory. Here the value of works – the locus of their "aesthetic" analysis – inheres in their sociability, and neither in their formal or affective dimensions, nor in their content. The question turns from "what does the work express or embody?" to "what does the work do?". While this is a provocative line of questioning, it betrays an ignorance of theoretical precedent, as recounted by Bishop (2006). Bishop goes on to call for more precise definitions to distinguish the authentically *participatory* from the merely *interactive*, making the claim that the former requires a degree of sociality. Still others (Beech 2008) claim that this reasoning does not go far enough – that mere participation is not enough, and that attention and political engagement are never assured (though are too often presupposed) in "participative" acts of art.

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