

Culture, Value, Cultural Value

Gus Stadler, English (Seminar Leader)
Vernon Dixon, Economics
Ken Koltun-Fromm, Religion
Jim Krippner-Martinez, History
Jennifer Patico, Anthropology (Mellon Fellow)
Jim Ransom, English
Tina Zwarg, English

A consensus undergirded the "culture wars" of the 1990s between left-leaning and right-leaning academics and commentators. Whether one's position was to uphold a "traditional" canon (usually made up of several works which had been unread 50 years earlier), argue for more diverse and plural canons, or condemn the idea of canonicity altogether, it was implicitly a point of agreement that the valuation of certain works and authors had serious and immediate cultural ramifications--that the value ascribed to artifacts of culture, understood as "works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity," directly informed its utility for culture understood in a broader sense as a "particular way of life" (Raymond Williams, *Keywords*). In this seminar we explore the unruly convergence of Western political, economic, and aesthetic concepts which, since the eighteenth century, have come to formulate the idea of cultural value which recent conflicts have taken as a given. We will examine how culture as a concept has structured, and been structured by, varying understandings of the relationships among aesthetics, politics, and social and economic theories of value. We will also pay particular attention to tensions between the intellectual history of this relationship and its history in lived practices of culture, particularly as they have taken place within certain subcultures, often (though not always) constituted through their members' particular relationship to gender, race, and sexuality. Broadly, we shall explore some specific ways in which work in the humanities and social sciences has been limited by a generally inadequate understanding of the historical and cultural contingencies inherent in the notion of value.

The early part of the seminar will survey the history of culture as a category via Raymond Williams's *Culture and Society*, and delve deeply into Marx's theories of value from *Capital*. We will then move backwards to the eighteenth century, and examine Kant's aesthetic theory, in which the category "aesthetic value" is significantly absent, for its articulation of an understanding of art's social function. We will compare what we find with some definitions of use and exchange value in pre-Marxian political economists (Smith, Ricardo). We will then begin to examine the appropriation of political economy's models of value by aesthetic theory as it interacts, in 19th-century Euro-America, with coterminously developing understandings of culture in both its Arnoldian form and its proto-anthropological form as "a way of life." We will examine how the discourse of middle-class consumption dissolves the distinction between use- and exchange value while reading Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction* in order to explore the ramifications of an economic, class-based model of taste. We will also take a brief look at how discourses of machine technology describe shifting notions of value for emergent mass-produced

cultural forms such as "pulp" literature, photography and cinema. (Benjamin, Horkheimer and Adorno, Radway). This will lead into a consideration, via Frederic Jameson and Jean Baudrillard, of "postmodernity" and cultural production in the wake of the "arbitrary" quality of use- and exchange value. Throughout, we will be tracing the presences, absences, and transformational roles of labor in theories of cultural value, while exploring the politics of metaphors used by materialist critics to describe its general "repression" or "disappearance" from the frameworks of most powerful cultural authorities. Pursuing these lines of inquiry, the seminar will attempt to construct a modern history of the discourse of cultural value.

In the second part of the seminar, we shall examine some theories and examples of cultural practice in the context of the history we have constructed. We will begin this section of the seminar with a reading of Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*, paying close attention to its understanding of value and its place in the history we constructed in the first semester. Subsequently, we will look at how a variety of "subcultures" of interest to the specific participants in the seminar develop and articulate different notions of the uses of art objects, and different understandings of the relationship between work and culture. One paradigmatic practice of this kind is camp in gay/queer circles, in which objects and forms typically associated with "trash" culture become agents of community, identification, and in cases like Warhol's, high art. We shall seek to employ our discussions from the first semester to examine camp not only as a gay/queer aesthetic, but also as a gay/queer theory of value. Another specific minoritarian cultural practice that participants might examine in this light, largely via the work of Gray Gundaker, is the use of books by slaves as physical objects in ways of developing extra- or semi-textual forms of cultural literacy. More generally, we shall look at how anthropologists theorize "alternative" modes of valuation, like "the gift" and tracing how these forms might "cross over" in literary or other aesthetic practices.