

"Going Down to South Park Gonna Learn Something Today".

On popular culture as critical pleasure and pedagogical discourse

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1. Popular culture as critical pleasure...

Approaching popular culture from cultural studies' perspective always implies a critical access because the notion of critique of ideology is a crucial one since the emergence of cultural studies in the UK in the 1950s. This is because culture is both a place of criticism as well as a place of the reproduction of hegemonic ideology. Both places overlap permanently although cultural studies often put an emphasis on culture as critical resistance. This phenomenon was firstly analysed within working class culture (see Hoggart 1957; Williams 1958) and later on extended to youth culture and subculture (see Hebdige 1979). Here, popular culture became more and more important as a way of articulating one's identity — often opposed to dominant-hegemonic discourses. Therefore, (popular) culture as the place of resistance against hegemony aims at decreasing oppression and increasing equality and social justice (see Kellner 2005: 61-64).

As Lawrence Grossberg (1999) points out, pleasure is the very beginning of every popular cultural experience. Through recreation and well-being spaces may be opened up which exceed a simple ideological dimension and thus allow the articulation of critique. Here, popular culture operates via an affective structure of feeling. This affective structure of feeling is part of the recipient's identity by means of cultural practices which embed the recipient into manifold circuits of power.¹ But as popular culture offers resources of resistance and opposition, this embedding does not necessarily need to happen in a dominant-hegemonic way. Hence, pleasure provides a direct and affective approach to complex discourses without simplifying them or bereaving their ambivalences (see Nestler 2006: 304). In this respect, the pleasure that popular culture offers to us is never simply escapist but potentially critical. Popular culture allows us to articulate oppressed positions. It eludes and opposes hegemony, it is potentially creative, resistant, political and collective. This may open up real areas of action as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari point out (see Deleuze 1980; Deleuze/Guattari 1976).

2. ... and pedagogical discourse

These interrelations explain why popular culture has to be taken seriously as a pedagogical discourse. According to Paulo Freire and Henry Giroux (1989: ix), popular culture should be a central part of curricula because education cannot be limited exclusively to school and cannot be seen isolated from popular culture (see Grossberg 1989: 91). Thus popular culture is an essential part of critical media pedagogy which aims at educating critical instead of 'good' citizens and therefore opposes what Freire (2007) describes as 'cultural invasion'.

The dialectics of incorporation and critique in the field of popular culture which we discussed earlier are crucial for movies (see Giroux 2002) where the significance of the affect and its political implications can be seen clearly. Movies — but of course TV series, too — are a source of shared pleasure, a source of entertainment and even escapism. They have great influence on popular imagination and public awareness. Furthermore, movies and TV series facilitate dialogue, critique and solidarity. Hence, they are a part of subjectivation. Being a part of subjectivation, movies and TV series can be used as a pedagogical instrument and let us intervene in the process of subjectivation via interpretation. For Giroux, movies and TV series are thus not only just another additive to education but an autonomous 'pedagogical text' (see Giroux 2002: 8) which may help us on developing critical skills and connecting the private to public and political life (see *ibid.* 2-10).

According to Michel Foucault (1992a), these critical skills could be understood as the art of not being governed *in such a way*. They cannot question *whether* we are being governed or not but they can question the way *how* it is done. As Foucault points out in his earlier works (see Foucault 1975), subjects as the product of both repressive as well as productive power are never able to leave the field of power. Within this field though, subjects may question power and shift its effects. But at first, power, which operates within the invisible and represents its effects as 'natural', has to be made visible, i.e. de-naturalized. Subsequently, the effects of power — e.g. strategies of subjectivation — can be shifted to another extent. Shifting power effects may lead us to what Foucault calls a realized utopia or 'heterotopia' (see Foucault 1992b) — alternative spheres of power where alternative subjects are possible.

As Judith Butler (1990) shows, one possible way of shifting certain effects of power to heterotopian effects is using the stylistic devices of parody. The critical and subversive potential of parody lies in its capability of unmasking 'nature' as a discursive construction and being able to criticize hegemonic discourses of social order. By this we can see that hegemony is being constructed by powerful socio-cultural practices. It is never 'natural'. Therefore, it can be changed. According to Butler, this may be regarded as 'performative subversions' (see Butler 1990: 128-141). Performative subversions demonstrate that no a priori identities exist and that the limits of identity are the limits of the social hegemonic. Identities are not 'natural' but instead are historically contextualized norms and fictions. Exaggerating 'natural' identities e.g. by parody may act as an instrument of critique. Parody subverts social normality by showing that identities are not 'naturally' given. Instead, identities are negotiable. Parody questions and shifts the meaning and necessity of existing social norms and may give some hints of alternatives. Hence, performative subversions may be empowering and emancipatory for those who do not fit into given social norms. We will exemplify this now by reading an episode of *South Park* as a parodic critique on racism.

3. Going down to South Park

As described by Stuart Hall (2000), racism is a form of immediate daily discrimination which does not always appear obviously but often implicitly. The media play a crucial role at the construction of racism as they operate on the level of ideology. They help constructing and defining the notion of race and charge it with racist ideology whereas ideology comprehends certain images, concepts and assumptions by which certain aspects of social life are represented and interpreted in order to organize certain meaningful social norms.² This implies that ideology is never organized in discrete elements but in a chain of meanings (see *ibid.*: 151). Being organized in a chain, ideology can only articulate certain elements in relation to other elements. In order to change ideological meanings, we have to re-articulate the elements of the chain. Realising this is often quite difficult because ideology is most powerful when it remains invisible and thus is not identified as an

ideology but as 'nature'. Hence, the media produce implicit racism by representing ideological 'truth' as authentic 'truth'. This is dangerous because the historically coined notion of race is represented as a 'natural' one which could not be challenged. But using the stylistic devices of parody, the media may also help us to deconstruct ideological 'truth'. For this purpose *South Park* is an adequate example. In fact, the parody used in *South Park* may act as an effective critique of ideology because it deconstructs authentic 'truth' by unmasking it as what it is: a product of certain historical discourses and practices which can be challenged and changed. A good, i.e. critical parody has to expose what it intends to deconstruct (see *ibid.*: 168). Afterwards, discriminating effects of power can be transformed into empowering ones. The re-articulation of ideological 'truth' can produce new, emancipatory meanings.

We will now have a closer look at the re-articulation of the 'n-word' in the *South Park* episode "With Apologies to Jesse Jackson" (2007). At the beginning of this episode we see Randy Marsh as he is trying to solve the \$ 10.000 question in *Wheel of Fortune*. Given letters are N _ G G E R S and the question is 'people who annoy you'. Randy hesitates but as he is about to win a fortune he finally gives the answer: 'niggers'. Unfortunately the answer would have been 'naggers' and so for Randy it is his wheel of misfortune. After this taboo breaking opening sequence — which is typical for *South Park* — three main strands develop. In the first strand Randy's son, Stan, tries to apologize to his African-American friend Token by trying not to make a 'big deal' out of this. But Token refuses to accept this apology as he thinks that in fact it is a big deal because being called a nigger is painful whether it happens by mistake or by intention. Token also disagrees about Stan's second attempt to apologize when Stan claims he could comprehend the pain Token feels. Finally, Token accepts Stan's apology when Stan admits that he does not get it. Now, Stan gets it. In the second strand, Randy tries to apologize by literally kissing Reverend Jesse Jackson's butt. But as Jesse Jackson is not the emperor of black people — although he claims so in this episode — Randy has to retry. After being discriminated against by a stand-up-comedian as 'nigger guy', Randy feels the pain that hate speech can cause. He tries to call attention to his case by performing at a poetry slam and by founding a trust for African-American culture in order to demonstrate his solidarity with African-American people. But it is no use. Randy is attacked by a group of anti-racist (!) rednecks. So he finally petitions the congress to ban the word 'nigger guy' — successfully. In a third strand, we see how Mr. Nelson, an anti-discrimination educator and a person of short stature, tries to explain the

painful aspects of discrimination to the pupils at South Park elementary school. Most of them seem to understand except for Eric Cartman who cannot stop laughing and telling discriminating jokes at the sight of Mr. Nelson. The situation escalates and even physical violence will not stop Cartman.

4. We learned something today

How can this episode be understood as a critical re-articulation of discrimination and how can popular culture act as critical pleasure and pedagogical discourse? At first, this episode makes implicit racism explicit. We see how racism is constructed by the word 'nigger'. By performing this word over and over again instead of censoring it by the use of the infamous 'bleep'-sound, racism is de-naturalized. We begin to think about unthoughtful cultural ideas about the other. Performative subversions demonstrate that racism is not a 'natural' phenomenon but a performative one which is powerfully actualized by daily cultural practices. But we can also use these practices in order to deconstruct and criticize racism. The point is, *how* such hate speech is articulated and by *whom*. *South Park* manages to stop this actualization by making it visible and shifts discrimination to emancipation. We learn about the painful effects of hate speech but we also learn that censorship is no answer to this problem (also see Butler 1997). Referring to Hall's words once more: we have to expose what we intend to deconstruct. Hence, the usage of the word 'nigger' is not exploited to attract cheap attention. Instead, we start to think about racism and learn something about the construction of race and the limits of the social hegemonic which usually makes us agree on the idea of 'naturally' given identities. Identities are culturally and socially produced in specific contexts and thus negotiable. Mostly — not in the case of the unconvincible Cartman though — there exist alternatives. Popular culture, as it allows us to articulate oppressed positions, unfolds its ideological critical potential through pleasure and is a part of a pedagogical discourse because it does not only entertain us but also teaches us some important insights. Popular culture not only incorporates us in circuits of power. Its appropriation and interpretation empowers us to intervene.

Notes

¹ In order to reflect on power it is crucial to reflect on practices. It is not sufficient to reflect on popular culture exclusively on a universal philosophical meta-level as it is done by Robert Arp (2007).

² As Erving Goffman (1963) shows, racism defines what is objectionably different by the construction of so-called 'phylogenetic stigmata'.

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TV Series

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