

# Comment: Chickens and Eggs – an Expanded View

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Klaus Nathaus and C. Clayton Childress convincingly argue that cultural and symbolic objects are produced before they are consumed and that therefore cultural historians should take a closer look at the social and economic conditions of cultural production. Instead of taking it for granted that mass reception inversely indicates the existence of a demand already ‘being there’, historians should dig into the production processes influenced (among others) by individual taste, material interest, and arbitrary decisions – or, as Nathaus, Childress and the often cited Richard A. Peterson would call it – contingency. While most of Nathaus and Childress’s examples stem from the field of music, I will in my response apply the cultural production concept to a non-musical field, namely documentary photography in the first half of the twentieth century. Further, I will raise some questions that still seem to be unanswered. Given that the causal relation between production and consumption by and large equals the chicken and egg problem, what sense does it make to shift attention from reception to production – especially when dealing with modifications of objects, commodities, or genres rather than inventions in the sense of ‘there was nothing like this before’? I will suggest to extend the concept beyond the study of ‘classical’ cultural objects – like novels or records – and to include commodities like food, clothes, or cars. Finally, I will raise the question of how to apply the production of culture perspective to socialist economies after 1945, which to my knowledge has not been tried yet.

Let us first take a look at the development of journalistic/documentary photography in 1920s Germany and Western Europe, which is a case in point for the production of culture perspective but has not been systematically explored in this fashion. This is all the more surprising since the entire development of photojournalism depended on technical progress in camera production. In the early days of photography, cameras used to be heavy and exposure times were long so that the production of images was mostly limited to non-moving objects. Starting in the 1920s and 1930s, new cameras were produced and quickly conquered the market. Successful manufacturers were Ernemann, launching the *Ermanox* in 1924, followed by Leitz and the legendary *Leica I* (1925), Rollei (*Rolleiflex*, 1929), and Kodak (*Retina*, 1934).<sup>1</sup> The new cameras facilitated the production of photographs in almost any given situation. In consequence, photography became both a hobby for ordinary people who

could now afford to buy a camera and a profession characterized by principles like 'learning by doing'. The new photographers – as they were often called<sup>2</sup> – did not 'choose' their profession; they had to invent it, following the principle of trial and error. What would sell to whom and when, what would be aesthetically challenging but not sell to agencies and magazines? The new and often semi-professional photographers started by documenting street scenes, the lives of celebrities, war and civil war (most prominently in Spain 1936–1939), nature and consumer goods. At the same time illustrated magazines boomed – first in Germany (where most of the candid cameras were produced), but also in Eastern and Western Europe, Russia, North America, and Japan.

Photojournalism was pushed by journalists, who expected photographs to draw attention to their texts, to tell a story or provide evidence; and it was pushed by photographers, who realized that they could sell their pictures in order to make a living. On the one hand, without the production of small and flexible cameras photojournalism could not have been established as a new field of cultural and symbolic production. Yet the demand for pictures had long grown in the age of daily newspapers and large-scale public advertising. It thus seems impossible to decide whether documentary photography flourished because there suddenly was a strong demand for pictures on the part of the magazines and their readers, or whether the magazines flourished because there suddenly was a mass supply of pictures. In any case, photojournalism – as a new field of cultural production as well as documentary photography as a new genre – did not vanish for lack of demand. Quite the opposite is true: photojournalism even prompted the emergence of several new and highly different professions, including the picture editor and the picture agent, the layout man (nowadays: art director), the paparazzo and the copyright lawyer (interestingly Nathaus and Childress also mention copyright as an 'object of study of fundamental importance').

Strikingly, many of the early photojournalists (like Robert Capa or Fritz Goro) were refugees who had to support themselves without communicating verbally in their host societies.<sup>3</sup> In order to understand how photojournalism could become a success worldwide it thus makes sense to look at photographers' work-

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Michael John Langford, *The Story of Photography: From its Beginnings to the Present Day*, London 1980, pp. 69–76.

<sup>2</sup> Werner Gräff, *Es kommt der neue Fotograf*, Berlin 1929 (Reprint: Cologne 1978).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Klaus Honnef/Frank Weyers (eds), *Und sie haben Deutschland verlassen... müssen. Fotografen und ihre Bilder 1928–1997*, Bonn 1997; C. Zoe Smith, Fritz Goro on Tape. An Emigre Photojournalist's Professional Biography. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, August 1985, URL: <<http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/detail?accno=ED258230>>; Sybil Milton, The Refugee Photographers, 1933–1945, in: Helmut F. Pfanner (ed.), *Kulturelle Wechselbeziehungen im Exil/Exile across Cultures*, Bonn 1986, pp. 279–293.

ing conditions and biographies – including the contingencies brought about by migration, war, and the need to adapt to ever-new environments. And it would likewise be interesting to study collective visual memory by examining the decisions made (sometimes arbitrarily) by picture editors whose main task it is to choose the ‘right’ images for publication.

When it comes to examining the meaning of a photography as a cultural and symbolic object the concept introduced by Nathaus and Childress proves highly effective. However, it might be complemented – for instance, by an actor-network theory (ANT) as developed by French philosopher and sociologist Bruno Latour.<sup>4</sup> Latour has studied the relation between subjects and objects, or rather human beings and the artifacts they interact with. Most importantly, he ascribes agency to what used to be considered ‘dead’ objects, offering a new view on a material world that is not merely ‘produced’ and (put in Heideggerian fashion) ‘there-at-hand’, but actively responds to its producers and consumers. Therefore, ANT could offer new insights into the processes of cultural production in that it disbands the concept of passive reception and replaces it by a more dialectic view on objects/production and subjects/consumption.

Setting aside photojournalism as a field of cultural production, I would like to address the question of how to define a cultural or symbolic object in the first place. Nathaus and Childress offer some examples from the field of culture in a rather narrow sense, be it high or popular culture, music or literature. However, it might make sense a) to distinguish more accurately between ‘cultural’ objects on the one hand and ‘symbolic’ objects on the other; and b) to focus also on the wider field of consumer culture, including food, clothes, cars, or consumer goods in general. In an essay first published in 1963, Erwin Panofsky offered some astonishing insights into the aesthetics of Rolls Royce radiators, indicating that aesthetic form and symbolic meaning is to be found in automobiles as well as in paintings or novels.<sup>5</sup> Likewise, food and clothes have long been part of cultural reflection and historical investigation. Thus, the use of the term ‘cultural’ or ‘symbolic’ object could well be extended to *all* commodities that shape modern societies by bringing about tastes, lifestyles, and social distinctions.

The most interesting question regarding the production of culture perspective, however, arises in the context of Cold War cultural production and consumption. Nathaus and Childress do not mention any attempt to apply their concept to examples of planned economy in the socialist sphere. Yet the fact that production was only indirectly steered by demand and that designs,

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Bruno Latour, *Wir sind nie modern gewesen. Versuch einer symmetrischen Anthropologie*, Berlin 1995; Andréa Belliger/David J. Krieger (eds), *ANThology. Ein einführendes Handbuch zur Akteur-Netzwerk-Theorie*, Bielefeld 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Erwin Panofsky, *The Ideological Antecedents of the Rolls-Royce Radiator*, Philadelphia 1963.

prices, and quantities were state controlled would implicate that the mechanisms at work differed substantially from those ruling a free market society. Sticking with the field of popular music, it may be of great interest to examine the ways in which (cassette) copies of Western records were produced and distributed in the GDR and how, in turn, the government's contempt for American popular music influenced its reception.<sup>6</sup> Many more genres could be studied considering the fact that the production of consumer goods in socialist economies was steered by the state but still had to adapt to unforeseen demands on the part of the consumers. In any case, it seems obvious that the proportion of contingency and planning would differ from that in capitalist societies and economies. Drawing on the example of documentary photography, for example, the impact of direct and indirect state censorship would surely be a central issue. Many other examples could be found to confirm that the production of culture is organized differently in socialist societies. The application of this perspective may thus bring about new insights into the history of culture in the socialist sphere as well as into its transformation after 1989/91.

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<sup>6</sup> Some research has already been done in this field without any reference to the production of culture perspective; cf. Michael Rauhut, *Beat in der Grauzone. DDR-Rock 1964–1972. Politik und Alltag*, Berlin 1992; Gerlinde Irmscher, Der Westen im Ost-Alltag. DDR-Jugendkultur in den sechziger Jahren, in: Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst (ed.), *Wunderwirtschaft. DDR-Konsumkultur in den 60er Jahren*, Cologne 1996, pp. 198–203; Christian Schmidt-Rost, Heiße Rhythmen im Kalten Krieg. Swing und Jazz hören in der SBZ/DDR und der VR Polen (1945–1970), in: *Zeithistorische Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History* 8 (2011), pp. 217–238.