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Casual Wear Meets Cultural Criticism

Cultural studies, as an academic discipline, marked a significant milestone last year, with the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the foundation of the Contemporary Centre for Cultural Studies (CCCS) in Birmingham, in 1964. Over its 38 year history the Centre housed, schooled and was associated with a remarkable number of notable and creative interdisciplinary scholars, including celebrated media theorist Stuart Hall, who served as an early director. What came to be termed the 'Birmingham School' of Cultural Studies has had an enormous and lasting impact, including here in New Zealand, where the innovative and interdisciplinary work undertaken by many of these theorists has informed and steered work in a wide variety of areas such as music, media, film, sociology, and the study of race, class, sexuality and gender.

Cultural Studies is a discipline that seeks to problematise and eradicate the division between so-called 'low' and 'high' culture. At the core of the discipline is an interest in the capacity of culture to both bolster and to push back against power structures. Here culture can be seen as a collection of dynamic flows, a practice rather than a static thing. Culture is something that we do, not something that we go and see on the wall of a gallery. Culture is the practice of everyday life. Through this lens there is no clear division between those who produce content and those who consume it; there is no such thing as a one-way-movement. Cultural Studies' situation within the academy, then, is a peculiar one, given that universities themselves have long acted as authorities on what does and does not constitute legitimate knowledge, through (for instance) the determination of what sorts of cultural texts are worthy of study. This less striated attitude towards cultural products sees as much value in Pasifika hip hop, cult science fiction films of the 1950s and modern Latin American telenovelas as it does in Regency literature, Italian opera and the German expressionist art.

The discipline's emphasis upon culture as process, as the creation of meaning, and as a site of contestation and struggle remains highly relevant – politically, socially, and economically. One needs only look at the recent *T-Shirts Unfolding* exhibition at the Canterbury Museum, which opened in mid-February 2015. A celebration of the popular and

the sartorial, the exhibition charts the evolution of the t-shirt from its origins in 1913 as US Navy underwear, designed to cover the (male) wearer's chest hair, through to its modern day ubiquity; the exhibition claims that in 2013 two billion T-shirts were sold worldwide. The vibrant exhibition clearly positions the T-shirt as a cultural artefact that has been shaped (and that itself shapes) issues of taste, class, (sub)culture, art, fashion, acceptability and the popular by considering its role in areas such as film, skate culture, pop art and the ongoing development of printing and design technology. Of course, the T-shirt itself – as both individual item and category of its own right – like any other cultural product and consumable, sits at the nexus of a multitude of factors and influences.

The most obvious intersection centres on the Museum's choice to display a shirt promoting the English extreme metal band Cradle of Filth. The shirt, which is classified as offensive to women and Christians, features an obscene slogan and the image of a nun masturbating, and the shirt was banned in 2007 by New Zealand's chief censor. The inclusion of a controversial T-shirt in an exhibition that highlights the ability of T-shirt art, as 'mobile billboard', to challenge, offend or poke fun is fundamentally unremarkable, although the choice to make available to the public any sort of banned material is noteworthy: Museum patrons who wish to see the shirt must display photo ID, agree not to take pictures, and then be shown in to the booth where the shirt is displayed, all of which amounts to a type of cultural theatre that emphasises, rather than reduces, the shirt's sophomoric shock value.

Rather, the Museum's choice to display the shirt, against the objections of so-called 'family values' groups, religious organisations and even the nearby YMCA, which is simultaneously displaying the *Spectrum* street art exhibit in conjunction with the Museum, speaks to a complicated flux of cultural pressures and concerns: freedom of expression; the ability of informed adults to make up their own minds about content; the acknowledgement of the power of popular cultural forms like music and clothing; the economic leverage provided by shock value; even the tacit sanction of such material by the Museum, which here acts as a type of arbiter of cultural value and worth. There is no doubt that the shirt is intended to provoke and offend, and perhaps

it is the reinforcement of the power of this particular garment that is the most interesting part of the whole debate.

While the Cradle of Filth shirt and the debates around its classification and exhibition are an obvious example of the sort of issues of cultural collection, display, classification that Cultural Studies is interested in, there are many more concerns at play within the exhibition that highlight the flux of cultural politics and economic power. It is notable that the exhibition centralises the article of clothing and the artistic process of its design while almost entirely neglecting the T-shirt's mode of production and history of manufacture. It quite rightly celebrates the work of artists, designers and artisans, but there is little acknowledgement of the people who firstly process the primary materials needed to make fabric, thread and ink and then make the clothing itself: exploited workers, largely from the third world or the Global South, whose manual labour and lack of rights highlights the toxic, inhumane underside of the ever-increasing demand for cheap, disposable consumer goods. No mention, either, of the waste and pollution caused by the manufacture and dye processes, or the environmental impact of those two billion shirts sold every year.

The only acknowledgement of this nasty side of the textile and clothing business is a comment that one of the T-shirt companies featured, AS Colour, sources its shirts ethically and supports non-sweatshop manufacturers. Here, one type of creative 'work' is privileged and made visible while another is erased. It's a significant omission, and one that brushes over the inequality that is an intrinsic part of capitalist commodity culture. It's also a bitter pill to swallow, given the exhibition's interest in countercultural art forms and the power of pop art to challenge the establishment.

These are the sorts of complicated and multivalent issues that show the local to be inextricably bound up within the global, and the individual connected to the communal, and that demonstrate that what appears to be the simplest of cultural artefacts, displayed in a relatively conventional way in a New Zealand museum, are part of much broader patterns and flows. This ambivalence – the celebration of the power of the popular, the acknowledgement of culture as process and contestation, the picking apart and the making-visible of modes of inequality – sits at the heart of the cultural critique that drives forward Cultural Studies practice and draws it out from the academy and into the public, where it belongs.

As a researcher and teacher of Cultural Studies at the University of Canterbury, which houses the

country's only Cultural Studies programme, and as someone who is keenly interested in the ways that we create and interact with all manner of cultural products – from music and film, to popular culture and the 'literary' arts, to food and drink and everyday discourse – I am really happy to be able to pick up the role of Cultural Studies Editor for *takahē*. I am excited to see how this magazine, as one small but lively mouthpiece, is able to contribute to and intersect with broader engagements with culture in Aotearoa New Zealand through the publication of work that combines aspects of cultural critique and creative non-fiction, and I look forward to the animated discussions that will no doubt happen on and off the page.
