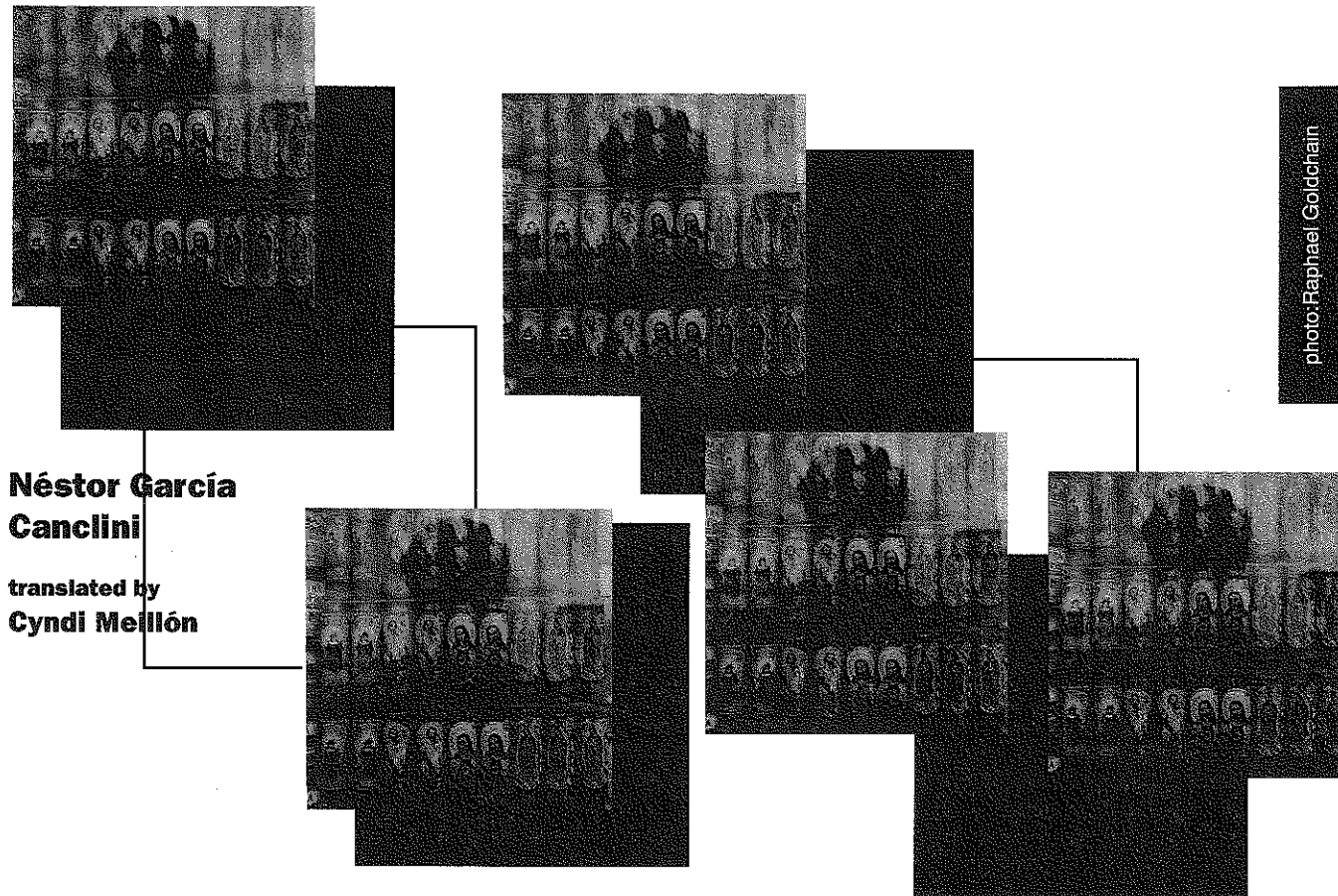


Studies of

Communication and Consumption:

Interdisciplinary work in neoconservative times*



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translated by
Cyndi Meillon

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People consume in different social scenes and in different ways, from the corner store to the neighbourhood market and from huge shopping centres to television. Nevertheless since activities on a massive and anonymous scale are intertwined with interactions that are intimate and personal it becomes necessary to think about them in relationship to one another.

We have learned in recent years that the massive and anonymous organization of culture does not inevitably lead to uniformity. What we observe with mass consumption is not the homogenization of consumers but rather interactions between distant social groups through a very segmented communication link. The major commercial networks provide heterogeneous offerings which relate to disparate habits and tastes. In Mexico City we find very differentiated groups among consumers. To speak of musical preferences alone, it is among older people and those with a low level of education that we find the greatest number of followers of *ranchera* and tropical music. Classical music and jazz mainly attract middle-aged professionals and



upper-level students. Rock listeners tend to be young people and adolescents. People tend to locate themselves in certain musical tastes and different styles in accordance with generation gaps and economic and educational differences.

Does so-called cultural consumption have a specific set of problems? If the appropriation of any good is an act that symbolically differentiates, integrates and communicates, objectifies desires and ritualizes satisfactions and if we say that to consume, in fact, serves as thinking, then all acts of consumption—and not just those related to art or learning—are cultural acts. Why then separate out what happens in connection with certain goods or activities and call them “cultural consumption”?

This distinction is theoretically and methodologically justified because of the partial independence gained in modern times in the areas of art and communications. Art, literature and science have been freed from the religious and political controls which previously imposed a variety of standards on them. Independence was achieved, in part, by a global secularization of society, but also by radical transformations of distribution and consumption. The growth of the bourgeoisie and the middle classes, as well as the general increase in education seemed to form specific publics for art and literature in which works are differentiated and selected according to aesthetic criteria. A set of specialized institutions—art galleries and museums, publishing houses and magazines—offer independent circuits for the production and circulation of these goods.

Products that are deemed to be cultural have use and exchange values. They contribute to the reproduction of society and at times to the expansion of capital. But in them the symbolic values prevail over utilitarian and mercantile values. A car that is used for transportation includes cultural aspects, but it is inscribed in a different register from the car that the same person—an artist, let's suppose—places in an exhibit or uses in a performance. In this second case, the cultural, symbolic and aesthetic aspects predominate over the utilitarian and mercantile ones.

What happens with radio, television, film? In spite of the economic pressures that strongly influence them in their style and the rules of communication, these mediums possess a certain autonomy from other types of production. A television editor or producer who only takes into account the mercantile values and forgets about the symbolic merits of what she or he produces (although this

Consumption and Communication in Multicultural Societies



may occasionally be good for business) loses legitimacy with the public and with specialized critics. There are groups of consumers with expert knowledge of the history of each area of culture—more so in the case of science, literature and art, but also in the case of soap operas and musicals—who select what they consume according to exact rules of taste and specifically cultural criteria.





**The Public is summoned
but groups, families
and individuals respond**



photos: Paz Errazuriz

As such it is possible to define the particularity of cultural consumption as the combination of processes of appropriation and uses of products in which the symbolic values prevail over the use and exchange values. This definition takes the particular character of cultural consumption into account. Not only does it take into account those goods that have greater autonomy, such as the type of art found in museums, concert halls, and theatres. It also includes those products that are conditioned by their commercial aspect (television programs), or by their dependence on a religious system (native crafts and dances), the development and the consumption of which requires a prolonged training in relatively independent symbolic structures.

At any rate, it should be pointed out that the peculiar character of modernity in Mexico and Latin America (where art and communications markets only attain a partial independence from religious and political conditioning) generates structures of cultural consumption that are different from those of the metropolis. The difference is notable, above all, in relation to European countries that have a more compact and homogeneous national integration. The subsistence of vast areas of traditional production and consumption craftwork, festivals, etc.—that are significant not only for their traditional producers, but also for large numbers of modern consumers—reveals the existence of a *multi-temporal heterogeneity* in the present-day constitution of our societies. This heterogeneity, resulting from the coexistence of cultural formations that originated in different eras, favours the types of cross-fertilization and hybridization that show up in Latin American consumption practices with greater intensity than they do in the metropolis.

It is not surprising to find that, within the tastes of consumers of all classes, there co-exist goods from different times and groupings. In a home collection of records and tapes we often find salsa next to rock and tangos mixed in with Beethoven and jazz. Around them, Colonial and home-made furniture make up sets that nobody finds inconsistent with modern pieces of furniture and electric appliances and posters announcing concerts of *avant-garde* music and posters for bullfights. The inhabitants of the dwelling are equally attached to all. These elements (which appear odd if we look at them from a perspective of historical evolution, in which progress substitutes new aesthetic tendencies for old) function as cultural and social reproduction, and serve as integration and communication for the ordered ritualization of practices.

Certainly, these frequently found mixtures do not eliminate the diverse and unequal appropriation of cultural goods. The hybridization of consumption is not homogeneous. Social differences manifest themselves and reproduce themselves in the symbolic distinctions that separate consumers (for example, those who go to museums and concerts and those who don't; those who watch cultural television programs and those who watch only entertainment programs).

How is it possible that a nation can exist—one with an integrated, analyzable system of cultural consumption—in a segmented, multicultural society, with various time frames and levels of tradition and modernity? The inevitable question can also be formed: how do we explain the fact that this cultural diversity persists after five centuries of colonial integration and independent modernization and the homogenization of academic, mass media and political life? It is convenient to ask the two questions together, because the answer is the same. The history of consumption demonstrates a dynamic, open and creative interaction between (various) projects of social modeling and (various) styles of appropriation and use of products. We have seen in the studies of "live

audiences" that theories of vertical and unidirectional domination by the senders of messages over their receivers, are incapable of explaining the complex processes of interdependence between these two entities. Contrary to the passive connotation that the notion of consumption still holds for many people, actions of assimilation, rejection, negotiation

**Underconsumption
and Incommunication in Neo-
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and re-working of what the broadcasters are proposing do take place. Among the television programs, political speeches and the things that consumers read and use there intervene the family, *barrio* or group culture, and other microsocial events. Each object destined for consumption is an open text that demands the co-operation of the reader, the spectator, or the user, in order to be completed and have meaning. Each good is a stimulus to thought and, at the same time, an un-thought in which consumers, when they insert it into their daily network, generate unexpected meaning. It is known that cultural goods are produced with more-or-less hidden instructions, practical and rhetorical devices that encourage certain readings and restrict the activity of the user. The consumer is never a pure creator, but neither is the transmitter omnipotent.

We can come to various conclusions from this. The first is that communications studies cannot only be studies about the process of communication, if we understand this to be production, circulation and reception of messages. The need also to include the structures, scenes and social groups that appropriate and re-elaborate the messages calls for the collaboration of communication theorists with sociologists and anthropologists—specialists in social mediation that cannot be reduced to communication processes.

At the same time, the plurality of codes and mediations in which messages are processed can help us to understand how so-called national cultures are currently constituted. How do we explain the fact that societies and nations exist, in spite of the conflictive diversity of consumers and consumption - Only because each nation is, among other things, the result of what the specialists in the aesthetics of reception call "reading pacts"—agreements between producers, institutions

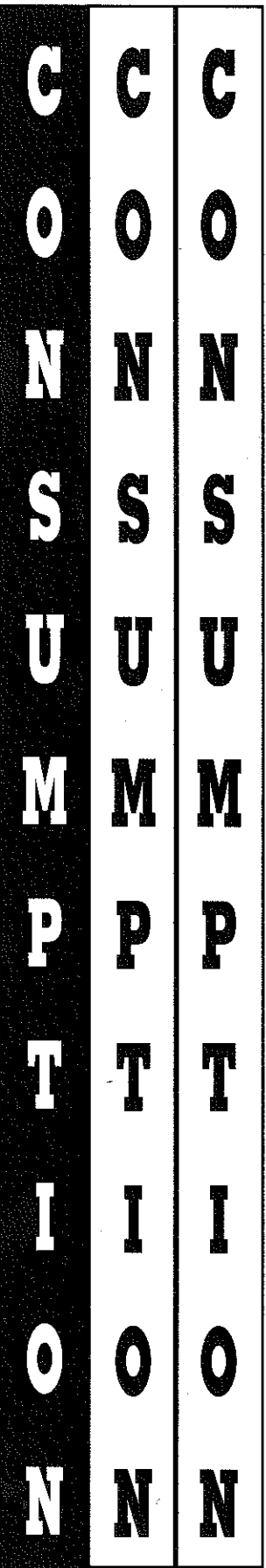
and receivers about what is communicable, able to be shared and credible in a given era. A nation is, in part, a hermeneutic community of consumers. Even those goods that are not shared by all are meaningful to the majority. The differences and inequalities take place in a regimen of transactions that makes possible coexistence among ethnicities, classes and groups.

I have avoided, in this definition of the national, the territorial and political conceptualizations that are prevalent in the bibliography on this issue. I do not forget

the importance of these factors, but by referring to the nation as a hermeneutic community of consumers, I am alluding to ways of experiencing the national in daily life, which perhaps have become central in its post-nationalist re-definition: cultures become de-territorialized and many political practices are subordinated to the commercial rules of mass communication. Here I see a promising area of interaction between communication theorists and political sociologists.

In order to understand current consumption processes in Latin America it seems important to understand the tension that exists between the national structure, historically consolidated in our societies, and the trans-nationalization generated by modernizing policies. The integration, communication and differentiation between classes and ethnic groups, that seems to be resolved by the institutionalization of the nation, are shown to be in crisis in the face of the multiplicity of internal and international processes that challenge this institutionalization. The national becomes diluted, first, by being invaded on a daily basis by foreign messages, and second, by the presence of regional movements of affirmation that question the centralist distribution of cultural goods to which this gives rise.

A new conception of the role of the state can be seen in recent governmental policies which hand over a large part of the national integration function to multinational communication companies. The critique of the populist state and the privatization of those areas that have been considered to be of public interest suggest the idea of new pacts that are not just economic agreements, but cultural agreements as well. New rules about the reproduction of the work-force and the expansion of capital, new models of competition among groups that wish to appropriate the social product, new norms



CONSUMPTION

of symbolic differentiation; these generate a restructuring of consumption. Will these changes bring new forms of integration and communication, or will they accentuate inequality and differences in the access to goods?

The answer to this question lies in an analysis of how priorities about necessities are established in the stage which is governed by the supposed self-regulation of the market. Hegemonic neoliberalism, acting within the old concept whereby the "objective" laws of supply and demand are the healthiest mechanism for ordering the economy, is promoting the concentration of production—and consumption—within continually more restricted sectors. The privatizing and selective reorganization that is taking place is, at times, so severe that demand is descending to the level of biological survival. For large sectors of the extremely poor, the needs around which people are organizing are those of food and work.

Some groups are organizing their response to this hegemonic policy by seeking the restoration of the previous social contract and the type of state it represents. Other see possibilities for resistance in the strengthening of traditional, craft-based, small-group forms of life that may still have validity for the reproduction of some sectors of society, but which have shown themselves to be ineffective at providing global alternatives. It is possible that these options still have considerable capacity for organizing and promoting significant mobilizations, but any such project should consider the state as a key objective, if it aspires to intervene in the modernizing and reorganizing that is taking place. I say this, not because the state is a good administrator or because it might be possible again to expect populist largesse, but because it is a space which might have value in terms of gaining public interest to counter the reduction of consumers to the level simply of consuming senseless objects.

In this sense the multidisciplinary study of communication and consumption could be a resource for understanding the meaning of modernization and for promoting the participation of broad sectors of society. For one thing, the collaboration of communications theorists who have specialized in learning about the structures of industry and cultural markets with sociologists and anthropologists dedicated to understanding the mediations and the processes of daily resignification can help the analysis of consumption to transcend the simple consideration of the commercial

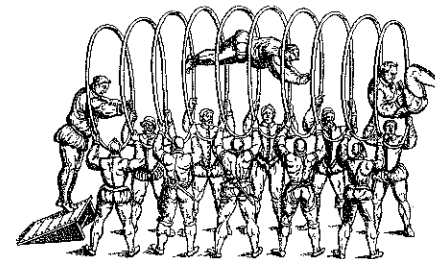
aspects of products. But it would also be useful if we could manage to come together to discuss the new mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion with regard to goods and strategic messages in the current modernizing stage.

As far as cultural consumption is concerned, since it continues to be necessary to seek the democratization of art and classical knowledge, modernization is confronting us with new demands. The global vision that we had proposed for the role of the consumer as the site of social reproduction, the growth of the national product and of competition and differentiation between groups leads us to ask what restrictive policies around the consumption of new technologies mean for the future. How does one confront a process of modernization that requires a more highly trained labour force while the drop-out rate from school is growing and access to specialized information is limited? We must assess what the growing unequal segmentation of consumption means for political democratization and the participation of the majority. On the one hand, there is an information model that permits one to act, if one has a personal subscription to exclusive television networks and data banks. Privatization has converted these networks into resources for a minority. On the other hand there is a communication model for the masses, organized according to the commercial laws of entertainment, which manage to reduce even political decisions to the level of the spectacle.

Confronting this dualistic organization of Latin American society is a major challenge which requires the collaboration of social scientists. By situating the growth of communication studies in the context of reduced consumption and information for the majority, we will be making visible the contradictions of this regressive end-of-the-century.

Néstor García Canclini is a researcher and theorist of Latin American cultural studies. His most recent book is Culturas híbridas: Estrategias para entrar y salir de la modernidad (Mexico City: Grijalbo, 1990).

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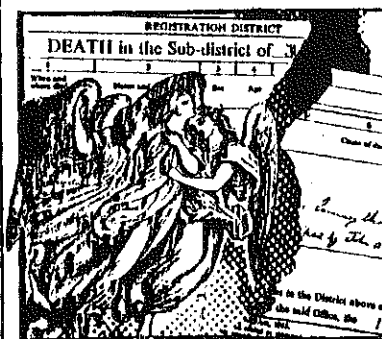
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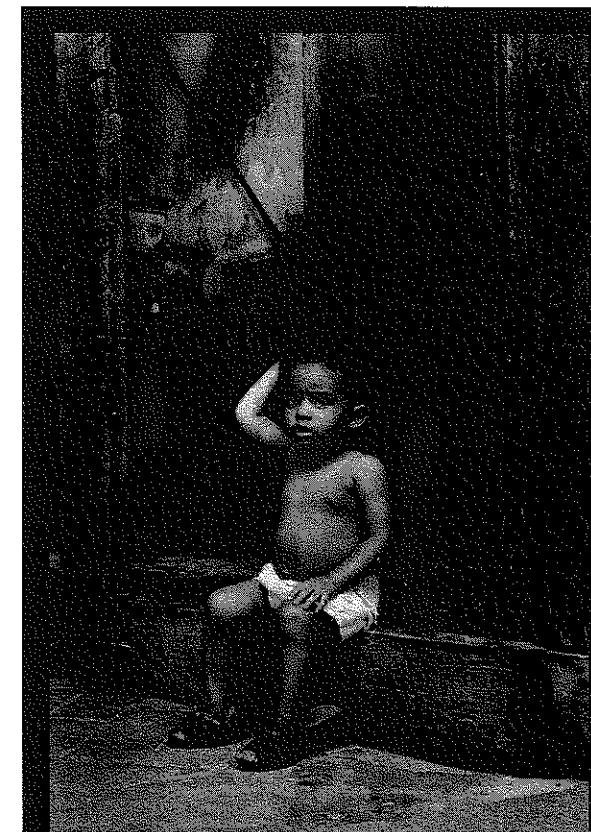
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