

# The Stuff of Culture

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[This is the opening essay of a new book of mine, called *Open Cultures and the Nature of Networks* which was published in English and Serbian by the lovely people of [kuda.org](http://kuda.org), late last year. It is being distributed by Revolver, Archiv fuer aktuelle Kunst. Hard copies are available from the distributor (<http://revolver-books.de/w3NoM.php?nodeId=675>) and a pdf with the english portion of the book can be downloaded via my website ([http://felix.openflows.org/pdf/Notebook\\_eng.pdf](http://felix.openflows.org/pdf/Notebook_eng.pdf)). Felix]

Today, we are confronted with a strange, hard-to-categorize question: what is culture made out of? Our answer, I am convinced, will have a profound impact not just on future culture, with a capital C, but on the entire the social reality of the emerging network societies. Today, culture, understood broadly as a system of meaning articulated through symbols, can no longer be separated from the (informational) economy, or, thanks to genetic engineering, from life itself.

Historically, there have been two different approaches to culture. One approach to culture would be to characterize it as object-oriented, the other as exchange-oriented. The first treats culture as made out of discrete objects, existing more or less independently from one another, like chairs around a table, or books on a shelf. While such things can be arranged in relation to one another, their meaning and function remains the same regardless. One person can sit on one chair, no matter how many chairs there are in a room, or how they are arranged. The content of a book does not change when re-shelving it. The other view takes culture to be made out of continuous processes, in which one act feeds into the other, in an unbroken chain. Like “la ola”, the wave people do in stadiums when the game they are watching becomes boring. By looking at the individual act in isolation, one cannot differentiate between whether someone getting up to stretch their tired bones, or they are participating in collective entertainment. The function and meaning of such an act are not self-contained in the act, but in its relation to others. It is not only what people do, but also, perhaps even more importantly, what happens between them, what flows from one to the other. The two perspectives create different sets of concepts for understanding culture: the timeless work of art versus the process of creation, the individual inventor versus the scientific community, the statement versus the conversation, the recording versus the live performance, and so on. These two perspectives, and the practices through which they are expressed, are currently coming into deep conflict with one another, hence the new urgency to the question: what is culture made out of?

Of course, culture always consists of both, that is of stable objects (such as furniture, cloths, works of artifice, timeless tunes, written laws) and of ongoing, fluid exchanges (for instance spoken languages, values, customs and routines). The issue is not an “either/or”. We do not have to choose one over the other. The dichotomy just sketched is an analytical device to highlight the differences. The real issue is how these two aspects relate to one another. Put simply, is the fixed a local, temporary hardening of the fluid, or is the fluid nothing but a residual aspect of the fixed? These are not only philosophical questions, but also political and economic ones. How do we organize society, to facilitate the creation of objects, or the creation of exchanges? How do we value the work of keeping the conversation flowing, versus the work going into the production of discrete units? It is no coincidence that this question is pressed upon us today because the issue is eminently technological. Before the invention of writing it was difficult to fix ideas on to material objects.

Culture was oral and the way of maintaining culture was to keep exchanging it, to re-tell stories far and wide. In the process story tellers, bards and other traveling performers, some more talented, others less, created infinite versions of the same basic material and these versions dissipated as quickly as the performers moved on. The technology of writing allowed for the first time the transfer parts of their fluid performances into fixed objects. The earliest work of Western literature, Homer’s *Odyssey*, is exactly that: an oral epic written up. The earliest written philosophy, Plato’s, is mainly dialogs.

Slowly, culture began to gravitate towards objects, both in terms of production and reception. Yet, until the development of print, the difficulties of (re)producing manuscripts put serious limits on the extent to which the object-orientation they contained could spread throughout culture. With print, and later with the mechanical recording of sound and images, the balance shifted decisively. Culture became re-made as a series of stable objects. With these objects came a distinct class of producers: artists. Now, one could think of speech without a speaker. Thus, the question of authorship became an issue. Who is speaking was no longer self-evident, as it was in oral cultures where speech and speaker were one and the same. At the same time, the new producers began to free themselves from the dependence of wealthy patrons who treated them as mere servants, like other talented artisans: cooks and gardeners for example. Instead they came to rely on dedicated apparatuses of specialized services to stabilize authorship and to organize the reproduction and distribution of the cultural objects they produced: texts, music, images, and the things in between. These organizers of (re)production and distribution were the cultural industries, born in the 18th Century, and coming into their own during the 20th century.

Initially, however, mechanical (re)production of culture, for all its improvements over manuscripts, was still cumbersome and its objects did not fully penetrate society for a very long time. An uneasy balance emerged between the new object-oriented and older exchange-oriented aspects of culture. Copyrights, turning fluid expressions into fixed objects, were introduced, but on a very limited scale. Most culture remained as fluid as its materiality allowed. One way or the other, this was an issue of relevance only to specialists. The lack of education restricted the number of producers and consumers of cultural objects and hence the size and influence of the cultural industries intrinsically tied to them; but not just that. The balance also reflected the fact that the movement from the exchanges to objects was strictly one way. Once fluid culture was realized as a fixed material object, for instance a book or a painting, it was almost impossible to convert it back into a fluid exchange because they are made to be passed around as objects. Of course, we still had exchanges about the objects. The question of interpretation and critical reading became important such as commentary

upon original, unchanging texts. However, the texts themselves were always understood as objects: discrete, fixed, and final. During the 19th and 20th century, an interlocking complex of legal, moral, and social practices was put in place to support and expand this view of culture. They managed to enshrine into common sense what was already in the material reality of objects: culture as a collection of discrete and stable objects. The most valuable of these were housed in museums, to be removed from the flow of time and context for good and frozen for eternity.

Now, today, all of this is changing. The old balance is no longer manageable and the common sense it embodied is challenged. We are in the midst of a struggle of how to establish a new balance. For one, media literacy has spread through societies at large, expanding the range of people able to consume cultural objects. Thus the markets, and the industries dedicated to serving them, have grown immensely. The spread of literacy has also enlarged the range of people able to produce culture accessible beyond their immediate environment. In fact, the self-conscious production of culture, high and low, is now an everyday activity of a large number of people, not just artists. Secondly, digital technologies have made cultural production cheap and distribution virtually free of costs. Equally as important, the materiality of many cultural objects has been transformed: from analog objects to digital flows. As an effect, the fixed and the fluid, the objects and the exchanges, are becoming harder and harder to differentiate. Email is blurring the distinction between spoken and written language, after centuries of hard work establishing the difference between the two. Copy and paste, remixing, sampling and other basic digital operations make it trivial to take fixed objects and reinsert them into fluid, ongoing exchanges. Just think of the difference between what a literary critic does (writing about literature to produce criticism) and the work of a DJ (using music to make new music). One is additive, the other transformative. One refers to the source material, the other embodies it.

The distinction between an object-oriented and the exchange-oriented conception of culture is not the same as the artificial and, from this approach, a useless distinction between material and immaterial culture. There are material objects defined by the exchanges they structure, and there are fluid processes rendered into distinct, immaterial objects. The first type is hard to imagine because it has been so thoroughly exorcised from our culture. Yet, there are still some remnants. One example is trophies, such as the ones given out in tournaments like the football World Cup, where the winner has only a temporary hold. These are, basically, objects made for circulation. Not even Brazil owns the World Cup (they have in their permanent possession only a replica). The value of the World Cup, then, is not in the cup itself but in the fragile and contested social relationships it embodies. It is valuable because it is so hard to get, and impossible to keep. If there were no more football world championships, the title would become meaningless and the cup reduced to the value of the gold it contains. Of course, the ultimate object made for circulation is money. We usually think of money as something sitting, or not sitting, in our wallets. However, it is much better to think of it as a means of communication. It moves and, like a rumor, it can shift its shape, form, speed, and direction at any time. Money is a very particular form of language; the more money you have, the louder speak your actions, at least in the markets. Its value is precisely its fluidity, that it can be translated into (virtually) everything. The moment it can no longer circulate, it is reduced to its material value, which is close to nothing. In short, there are still several objects which are made for circulation rather than possession and whose value depends on the entire chain of circulation, as opposed to their value as objects alone.

The other case, immaterial processes treated as objects, used to be much harder to imagine, until quite recently. How can something as fluid as an idea be fixed, counted

and owned? Much less, how can a tune that has already been sung in public be stolen? However, today, we are witnessing major attempts to establish exactly this conception of culture at the core of global, informational capitalism. The basic argument is simple: the immaterial and the material need to be treated in the same way. There is no difference. An idea is like a cow. In the same way that the owner of a cow can freely decide whether to sell the milk, the live animal or chunks of dead meat, the creator of an idea is free to do whatever she wants with it: license it for one time use, license it perpetually for certain uses, sell it altogether, keep it to herself, or give it away. As with cows, any use what is not specifically authorized is prohibited: clear and simple.

Crucial to maintaining the object-oriented view of the immaterial is to fortify the boundary between the fixed and the fluid. Fluid exchanges, the ongoing processes of telling, re-telling, changing and transforming are, almost by definition, uncontrollable. Objects, on the other hand, with their distinct form and shape, with their clear beginning and end, can be numbered, measured, and controlled. Only then can they be bought and sold in the markets. This seems to make sense when thinking of the immaterial in material metaphors. For example, the folders on a computer are deleted by throwing them into the trash bin. What such metaphors mask is that the immaterial and the material are very different in important ways. While it is possible to steal a music Compact Disc from a store, depriving the rightful owner of its possession, copying a song from someone's hard drive does not deprive the original owner. Digital technologies enable infinite, perfect copies. Within a digital system, moving a file is, in fact, always a process of copying (and later deleting), rather than of displacing.

An open, digital, networked culture is profoundly exchange-oriented. It is much less like a book, and much more like a conversation. That is, it is built upon a two-way relationship between the fixed and the fluid enabled by new technologies. No longer all that is sold melts into the air, as Marx famously put it, but now, digital air can be turned into solids any time. Yet, fortifying the boundary between the two makes precisely this impossible. A two way relationship, a give and take between peers, is artificially pressed onto a one-way relationship where one side does all the giving, that is selling, and the other does all the taking, that is, buying. Instead of the creation of culture, we have the culture of consumption.

This situation, per se, is not new and not bad. Rather, distinction between the creator and the audience is at the core of conventional cultural industries. Yet, there is a substantial difference between the culture of consumption created by old media, and the culture of consumption to be enforced through networked media. There are two main differences. Firstly, one-way broadcast media were restricted to relatively few channels each in their own, self-contained medium: books, newspaper, radio, television. In other words, these media were pervasive, but still relatively isolated instances. A television was for watching television and not much else; it was the same with the radio and newspapers. Secondly, the analog quality of these media supported the object-character of the products. There was not much a television viewer could do with what he saw, based on the materiality of the broadcast. He could react to it, interpret it, but not really change it. So, there was no need to control the media user. Now, both of these aspects are changing. Networked communication technologies are expanding, creating a huge network of multi-media hypertext bringing together what used to be entirely separate communication universes. Private and public communication, work and play, business and social activism are all based on the same technological platform, the Internet. It becomes harder and harder to get away from the communication networks without abandoning some of the most fundamental tools of social participation. Today, turning off the computer is far more consequential than

turning off the television. With the growth of wireless access and the connection of all sorts of objects (such as cars, refrigerators and implants) to the Internet, this is only getting more pronounced. This, by itself, is not necessarily a problem.

However, because of its digital, two-way nature, this new global communication platform does enable anyone to transform fixed cultural objects into fluid cultural exchanges, undermining a core aspect of contemporary capitalism, which, as we have seen, is tied to an object-oriented view of culture. Consequently the boundary between static one-way distribution and dynamic two-way communication needs to be reinforced where it is being eroded: at the level of the individual user. Given the pervasiveness of the communication networks, it means that all users need to be controlled, everywhere, all the time. Contrary to television channels, communication networks are used in all aspects of life. This means that control will have to extend into the capillaries of mediated communication, that is, into every aspect of social life.

So, this is what is at stake: a profound struggle over the stuff digital, networked culture will be made out of. Will it be a culture of fixed object, circulating through an infrastructure of control, where everything that is not authorized is prohibited? Lawrence Lessig called this a “permissions culture”. Before doing anything permission must be asked for which may, for no particular reason, be withheld. This is a culture that continues to make a hard distinction between production and consumption, between sender and receiver. There are a small number of producers and a large number of consumers and access to the resources of future cultures (the culture of the past ready to be embodied in the new) is restricted to a few, and controlled by even less. To bring this vision about, copyright law is being strengthened, seemingly without limits. The desire to control is enforced technologically through digital rights management systems, and propaganda campaigns, which are mounted to teach children that copying files is unethical and evil.

This is the culture of the media conglomerates, and their global stars. In this culture, the place of artists is ambivalent. For most, it means difficult conditions, as independent production becomes more complicated due to the ever more stringent control controls being placed on source materials. But ensuing practice of cold, hard media capitalism is counterbalanced by a warm, soft story: the artists as the gifted individual and also the special social status that this position confers. To the lucky few, the capital accrued is not just social, but includes wealth and fame beyond imagination of artists of earlier generations.

The alternative is a culture based on free access to the raw material of creativity, other people’s work to be embodied in one’s own. This is the culture of collaborative media production, of free and open source software, of reference works such as the *Wikipedia Encyclopedia*, of open access scientific journals and music that is being made and remixed by the most talented of artists (rather than those whose legal departments manage to clear all the necessary rights). Free access to the source material of culture is a precondition for creativity to flourish. Nobody knows this better than the creators themselves. It is not a coincidence that most writers have substantial personal book collections and spend much of their time in libraries. Not even writing is a solitary process. The promise of open access is matched by the promise of free distribution and of being able to actually reach the audiences who value what one is producing. This promise is particularly important for those who produce for audiences too specialized to be of interest to the commercial cultural industries.

However, free distribution of works is a double-edged promise to artists and other creative producers. On the one hand, it enlarges the range of people who can appreciate the works; this is good in terms of reputation-building. On the other hand, it undermines a potentially important income stream: the sale of their works. As a result creative producers are forced to find new ways of generating income, and thus making their work sustainable. In the field of software, there are two ways this is being done. One is the growth of service companies which create customized adaptations of existing packages to fit particular client needs. Thus, programmers are paid to change existing software to make it better work for their clients. In the processes, they create code that released back onto the open source project, thus contributing to the advancement of the project as a whole. The other is that programmers are paid by their companies to contribute to a project, either because the company wants to use the software internally, or because they want to create a service based on that software. In both cases, the code thus produced remains open source, but paid-for services are derived from it. In the arts, a somewhat similar process can be observed. Artists are less and less 'autonomous producers' who create the works by themselves and then seek to sell it (say, as painters do). Avant-garde art, throughout much of the 20th century, was moving away from the production of artifacts (see the essay *Culture Without Commodities*). Rather, artists are becoming providers of specialized services (or performances). Particularly in the field of new media art, most work is being done as commissions. Artists have to apply with a project and some form of jury decides which is being financed and which not. Such works are not dependent on markets where objects are sold, but are, again, becoming directly dependent on wealthy patrons, public or private institutions, that decide which art is going to be financed. This enables artists to produce works that are not in a sellable format (stable objects that can be passed around), but also creates new kinds of dependencies potentially undermining the freedom of art so crucial to the culture of modernity. As culture is infusing more and more aspects of contemporary life, and the range of producers is widening but the special status of the artist and the social capital attached to this position, is being eroded. Artists are becoming, again, artisans, not fundamentally different from others creative producers.

The controversy between the object-oriented and the exchange-oriented visions of culture is currently being fought on all levels, legal (expanding versus narrowing copyrights and patents), technical (digital rights management versus distribution and access technologies), and economic (exchange of commodities versus provision of services). Crucially, however, it is also fought in the field of culture itself, in ongoing experimentations on how we can produce, reproduce, and interpret new forms of meaning. This is the native environment of artists and other creative producers, whose everyday practice puts them at the heart of this epic struggle.