

Book Review

Scott Lash & Celia Lury. Global Cultural Industry: The Meditation of Things. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007. ISBN-13: 978-07456-2482-2

Reviewed by **Muhammad Yousaf¹ & Zhu Zhenming²**

The book “Global Cultural Industry: The Meditation of Things”, is an apt and interesting account of culture and its transformation in the global cultural industry. Lash and Lury have introduced a new approach to analyse products of global cultural industry that differs from commodification and commercialization of the culture, which has been the focus of classical texts on media and culture. The focus of investigation of previous texts was the consumption of ideas in the cultural industry, whereas Lash and Lury have employed a different epistemological and methodological orientation and have taken a step forward from mediation to the thingification of cultural products in the global cultural industry. Their methodological approach, to track the biography and trajectories of the objects as they move and transform in the media land scape, is also quite different from classical texts. Their approach is neither ‘objectivist’ nor ‘constructivist’ but ‘objectual’. This phenomenological understanding of the objects gives a pertinent description of their movement and transition in the media environment.

¹ PhD Scholar; Institute of Communication Studies, Communication University of China, Beijing

² Associate Professor, Centre for International Communication Studies, Communication University of China, Beijing

The book reflects the background and changes of the neo-liberal cultural context of the 1990s. It reveals how the global cultural industry has moved forward from Horkheimer and Adorno's classical cultural industry theory. Furthermore, it explains how thingification of ideas moves from the mediation to the thingification stage in the sociology of the objects, i.e. how the cultural industrialization moves from the thingification of ideas to the mediation of things. How this thingification creates new and different meanings and how all the meanings become coherent in a new place. The thingification of cultural products also helps us to understand how the same cultural products have quite different and signified meanings during their transition. It is within these dynamic contexts that this book describes the journey of cultural products from ideas-things and things-ideas in both the local and global cultural industry.

The reason for the selection of the seven-objects for study in this book is their prominence in the current media landscape along with potentially long and diverse trajectories. The objects include: *Trainspotting*, *Toy Story*, *Wallace and Gromit*, Euro'96, the art movement, Swatch, and Nike. The book is categorized into nine chapters, each chapter aims to explore the heterogeneity and diverse trajectories the objects go through in the global cultural industry. Chapter 1 expands on the book's use of critical theory and the authors' main assumptions. It describes how cultural products have been transformed from identity -difference, commodity-brand, and representation-things. Likewise, how signs become things which they represent. In other words, in global cultural

industry, things become alive.

The tracking of the *Trainspotting* biography, explains how this object follows transformation from short story to novel, to film, to poster, and stage performance. Among all movements the poster stage was most remarkable because it used literal connotations of trainspotting with graphics. The description and exploration of Young British Art Movement (YBA) through various exhibitions shows how catchphrases and gestures have played roles as intensities of affect in the movement of YBA. The biography of Nike tells us that brands have their own life in the global cultural industry. They are not consumed like merchandise; they enjoy temporality and keep on transforming in this exchange of things. For example, when insignia are placed on the back of clothes, they communicate even when our back is turned (Chapter 2).

Euro'96, the 1996 European championship, describes how football transformed from a sport occasion into to a cultural property, from tournament into a brand. It demonstrates how different cultural objects attach with other cultural objects e.g., footballing event marketing through music and vice versa. It contextualizes how objects and events like football uses media through translation and transposition to extend its reach. The Euro '96 also illuminates how different brands compete and how 'sectoral exclusivity' provides an unfair competitive advantage to one brand in a sector by excluding other competitors e.g. Coca-Cola and Pepsi's struggle against each other. Moreover, the comparison of European public, private and corporate models to American models shows how brands have to compete in a different fashion at

different places, e.g., multi-sponsors and sectoral exclusivity versus right delivery model (Chapter 3).

Chapter 4 explores the background of Kantian judgement assumption replacement with experience- how arts has influenced our lives, e.g., the finality of Kant's art-object without an external intention and view of minimalists' where art-object becomes cinematic apparatus and viewers can experience it. This clarifies how ideas enjoy primacy in the world of art. In animation, the object or image, whether Claymation or computer-animated, is unremittingly represented for action and narrative. Hence, animation is actually a phenomenon to animate inanimate objects. This process develops through gesture and action, notation, and motivation. The potential use of transposition makes characters of these animated cultural products fit for merchandising. To make viewers believe, these toy-objects are given life keeping in mind their physical and conceptual essence like the thingification of Top Story and Wallace and Gromit (Ch. 5).

The biographies of two brands Swatch and Nike explain how the brands compete with regard to strategy and technology-driven marketing in manufacturing industry in the global cultural industry. Swatch is produced by The Swatch Group Ltd, which owns 22-25 percent of watch production sales in the world. It is treated as an accessory rather than a simple watch in the brand-oriented contemporary. In other words, people have emotional bond to Swatch products.. The temporal biography of Nike is a story of challenges and opportunities. Nike owned 29 percent of sales for global market for trainers in 1991. The reason for such a big

share in the global market is an emotional relationship with consumers for repeated purchase of the brand. This discloses how brands use personification, commodification and abstract personification to persuade consumers. E.g., Nike uses athletes for endorsement of messages in advertisements (Chapter 6). The philosophy of flow and circulation of the Toy Story, Wallace and Gromit, Swatch and Nike is also very interesting and inspiring. These objects circulate in the global economy as little gifts, and enjoying temporal significance. In the open system of goods competition, brands like Swatch and Nike not only depend on advertising and promotion but also arrange special events like openings, competitions, launches, visits and even performances (Chapter 7).

The cultural industry of Latin American countries is quite different from Anglo-Saxon and continental Europe. It is mostly state owned and politically-oriented. For example, the cultural industry in Brazil has passed through three distinct stages, state affiliation and dependence on large American broadcasting companies, the 'Fordism' phenomenon of Europe and North America, and emergence of the concept of national economy and national industry in Latin American countries. The third stage more or less turned towards neo-liberalism and radio and television followed US- model of private ownership. Television growth has been slow in Brazil and in the early 1970s about 68-80 percent of news content was provided by US wire services. Brazilian media sector still is the most concentrated in the world. It is family ownership oriented for example the Marinho family of Globo,

Civitas family of Abril, and the Frias family of Folha enjoy monopoly in Brazilian media landscape. In the field of new media by March 2006, Brazil has 14.1 million active home internet users and 25.9 total internet users. About 85 million mobile users make Brazil world 5th largest mobile consumer country according to 2005 statistics. Furthermore, Brazilian film industry is the sixth largest film market in the world and it is more influenced by European tradition as compared to USA (Chapter 8).

Although many scholars differ with Lash and Lury regarding the phenomenological approach, but also their book has developed a different perspective for the understanding of the cultural objects in the global cultural industry. Scott Lash's contribution to the analysis of the cultural industrialization is an innovation both from ontological and epistemological point of view, i.e. from the traditional ideas' materialization in terms of sociological mediation to the symbolization of things as result of the materialization in terms of phenomenological description. It brings new insights into the study of cultural objects and their transformation therefore; it deserves attention of both academia and general public.