A Full Circle: Returning the Instruments of Cultural Production to the Many

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Introduction

C ulture has been most frequently understood as the outcome of shared imagination. It is that and more: culture, specially in the larger sense of a 'national' culture, is also a consequence of technology; a product of power.

In initiating a regional dialogue on emerging cultural formations, emphasis must be given to the forces and counter-forces that influence the consolidation and metamorphosis of national cultural forms. Much work has indeed been done concerning not only the power of cultural symbols, but also the role of power distribution in the determination of cultural norms.

As the so-called Information Revolution produces swift and fundamental changes in the national cultural forms visible in our region, it is indeed appropriate that we review our cultural forms through the prism of historical, technological and political forces.

The member-nations of the ASEAN, with the exception of the Kingdom of Thailand, are all fairly young entities who achieved identities as distinct political communities only at mid-century. All are characterized by great racial, ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity. Communal conflicts continue to simmer under the thin veneer of nationality and 'national culture' enforced by enlarged state apparatuses. These conflicts intermittently explode in violence -- or, at the very least, implicitly express themselves in policy struggles and partisan alignments.

The threads of an emerging regional economy, pushed forward by the vision of an ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) and encouraged by preferential treatment of intra-ASEAN joint ventures, are woven largely by *nanyang* linkages: that now significant web of ethnic Chinese entrepreneurs who play prominent roles in each member-nation's economy. This will be a critical factor not only in the formation of a regional economic network but also, within the globalizing terms of the Information Revolution, the emergence, in some form, of a 'regional' culture forming around the nexus of investments and trade. That will not be unproblematic.

The first step towards grappling with the possibility of an overlaid 'regional' culture will have to be a much clearer elaboration of the process of formation of our respective 'national' cultures.

This essay will be a preliminary examination of the Philippine 'national' cultural formation. It will focus on the synergy of historical forces, technological advances and political change that will explain the Filipino 'national' as it is presently constituted. It will not deal in any great detail in specific cultural products and artistic forms. The discussion that follows has been organized primarily as a small contribution to the ASEAN roundtable on culture.

Consider this essay open-ended. It is animated much more by curiousity than by any comfortably established theory about how and why our 'national' culture takes the form and semblance that it does.

Layers of Cultural Formation

The nation, as one theoretician put it, cannot be anything more than an 'imagined community.' Its viability rests on the degree to which its symbols are accepted and its existence affirmed by acceptance of civil obligations.

The Filipino nation is a fairly recent idea.

Although what now composes the Republic of the Philippines existed as a definite administrative territory within the Spanish Empire for four hundred years, the inhabitants of the archipelago never saw themselves as belonging to a singular community that gave them an identity more fundamental than the linguistic tribe to which they belonged. The inhabitants were commonly subject to the authority of the colonial power; but they did not understand themselves to be a sovereign community.

At best, a sense of community was established by common adherence to the Christian doctrine propagated by the colonial authority. But that notion of community excluded those -- such as the minoritized Islamic communities and the non-Hispanized upland tribes -- that the colonial power failed to subdue. Along the lines of an imported faith, the lowland and coastal communities evolved a sense of shared destiny far ahead of the others.

Most of the early revolts against Spanish colonialism were sparked by personal grievance, although they spread rapidly in the dry grass of a shared sense of oppression against the foreign master.

It is notable that in many of the revolts that punctuated the long rule of Spain over the archipelago, rituals and prayers patterned after those of Catholicism were performed by the dissidents. The pidgin Latin utterances and the corrupted ceremonies underscored one thing: the *indios* did understand that colonial power rested not only on the constant application of force but also in the unceasing veneration of religious symbolism. By appropriating those symbolisms for themselves, they were diminishing the power of colonial authority. Many of the failed rebellions retreated into cults that survived generations after the original instance of overt confrontation with the enemy.

The imagination of a national community was first accomplished by the Propaganda Movement in the late 1880s and early 1890s. This movement was composed mainly of European educated liberal intellectuals. It inspired the formation of the *Katipunan*, a conspiratorial movement dedicated to the forcible overthrow of Spanish colonialism. Although committed to the idea of national independence, the conspiratorial organization, at least at its inception, had only a vague idea of the parameters of the national community it sought to establish.

While nationalism captured the imagination of the intelligentsia, the concept was only loosely grasped at the grassroots. Many of those who participated in the revolution against Spanish colonialism understood the movement as one directed against foreign tyranny. The affirmative element of Filipino nationalism -- subscription to a national entity and, therefore, a certain willingness to submit to its goals -- has been underdeveloped since.

The imagination of a national community, the first ingredient in the development of a national culture, could hardly be described as a totalizing element in Philippine society. At best, it was merely a layer of thought superimposed on an already multi-layered cultural praxis. Hispanic culture and its religious symbolism was a secondary layer of cultural praxis that did not displace the culture colonialism found in the islands. That colonially prescribed culture was woven with indigenous belief systems and cultural practices. In the dialectics of cultural formation, Hispanic influence was indigenized as much as indigenous culture was Hispanized. Whatever might pass for a 'national culture' was a tertiary layer, anchored largely on the images and perceived goals of the Philippine Revolution of 1986. It remained in continuous competition with rival identities and loyalties, principally a sense of belonging to an ethno-linguistic group.

The archipelagic characteristic of the Philippines helped reinforce the sub-national identities and loyalties of its people. The persistence of a 'weak state' -- successive regimes with low institutional capacities for uniformly applying the rules -- was an additional factor explaining the existence of strong loyalties to sub-national identities.

Up until the late twentieth century, secessionist impulses remain, not only among the minoritized Islamic communities but also among major ethno-linguistic groups. Cebuanos constantly complain about 'imperial Manila' and 'Tagalog imperialism.' During the height of the national debate over land reform in the late eighties, Ilonggo landlords actually organized a Free Negros Movement, threatening secession and the establishment of a Republic of Negros. The disarticulated nature of the Philippine economy (the existence of a 'national' economy continues to be the subject of debate) makes regional secession more viable than it might appear at first blush.

'National identity' has been continuously problematized in Filipino scholarship. In pursuit of the ends of 'national identity,' a national language, Filipino (based largely on Tagalog), has been legislated into existence. Its use has been encouraged through the school system. But in the last analysis, it has been the movies and the broadcast media, rather than the government commission organized to define the 'national' language, that determined usage and encouraged popular acceptability for what passed as the common comprehensible linguistic medium of national conversation.

Through the course of this last century, the evolution of communications technologies figured as a decisive factor in the formation of a 'national' culture in the Philippines.

Print and the National Imagination

Although there is evidence of widespread use of an indigenous writing system before the Conquest, much of the knowledge systems and the collective memory of the people who inhabited the islands was transmitted orally. That deeply-rooted oral tradition persisted to the present day, defying the hegemonization of culture that normally follows as a consequence of the centralization of power.

The main vehicle of the cultural hegemonization project commenced during the period of colonialism was print.

Print technologies allowed the efficient reproduction of knowledge and information. It also facilitated the standardization of language and the emulation of literary forms. By setting the 'canons' of acceptable usage and literary form, print excluded large regions of discourse that were 'formatted' in the oral tradition. Information and versions of knowledge found in print were acceptable as evidence; those in the format of the oral tradition were merely 'hearsay.' Print established its own criterion of validity. What was written and reproduced is to be presumed true. Everything else was 'superstition.'

Colonialism systematically invalidated forms of discourse outside its own. The native writing system was outlawed. Native medicinal techniques and curative practices were kept unincorporated in the standard texts. Indigenous beliefs, concepts, and interpretative techniques were suppressed.

The most important characteristic of print technologies was its susceptibility to control. To this day, print technologies (as against broadcast technologies) remain subject to extensive regulation. The variance in regulatory schemes governing the various communication technologies has less to do with their efficiency or pervasiveness and more with the varying susceptibility of these technologies to regulation. Witness how the print media in the present day, inspite of their inferior reach and negligible influence in the formation of public opinion, remain extensively regulated while digital information channels are completely unregulated. It would be too costly and too disruptive for modern governments to control the flow of digitalized information.

While print was the most powerful method for reproducing and conserving information, print-based culture constituted the mainstream. The historical project of evolving a 'national' culture relied, almost exclusively, on print-based communication.

The economies of scale pertaining to print-based information reproduction marginalized local literatures and favored a 'national' literary center based in the metropolis. Small readerships for non-metropolitan languages could not sustain a culture industry devoted to the enrichment and conservation of these languages. Consequently, these languages were pushed into the purgatory of 'languages spoken at home' (the official categorization of the national statistics office). As merely 'spoken' languages, they shed off (through disuse and domestication) much of their originally rich vocabularies. They lost the precision and rigor of the written word. They became merely 'casual' utterance: inutile for the creation of new knowledges and *avant-garde* cultural forms.

Orally-based culture was confined to the margins as 'folk' songs, 'traditional' dances and 'popular' theater. They were relics, curiosities, and conversation pieces. They ceased to be the means for interpreting contemporary reality.

The emergence of print-based communication as the nexus for the creation of a national culture facilitated comprehensive mediation by the central political authority. The bulk and permanence of printed information made it vulnerable to censorship and restrictions on circulation. Books and periodicals are vulnerable to classification as 'subversive.'

To this day, practicioners in the print media tend to demonstrate more restraint than their colleagues in the broadcast

media because of their vulnerability to libel suits. Radio broadcasters, for instance, may alter their tone to convey more than what is actually said. A slight grimace by a news reader on television may completely undermine the message being delivered. The writer in the print media, by contrast, is confined to the single dimension of textuality.

When print was the hegemonic nexus for the reproduction of a national culture, the power-wielders were able to effectively exclude from the circle of influence those who were unable to speak according to the standards set by the texts. Language was the fence that set apart cultural ghettoes. During the period of Spanish occupation (and the period succeeding it), the ability to speak Spanish was an indispensable 'union card' to the closed circuit of social influentials. There was a standard of proper prose. Everything else was invalid utterance.

Through most of this century, proficiency in the English language was the essential attribute required for upward mobility. Poor command of the alien language was sufficient ground for ostracism, for exclusion from the circuit of influentials that set standards for what is acceptable as 'culture.' This circuit perpetuated itself through the formalization of discourse. Story-telling, for instance, had to conform to the standard canons of literary form. It had to be either epic poem, short story or novel. It cannot be random conversation: this belonged to the discredited sphere of the oral tradition.

In a deeply segmented culture such as those that characterize post-colonial societies, language closely follows the fault-lines of the power structure. Language defines class. Idiom denotes status. Nowhere is this more pervasive than in a culture mediated principally by the printed form.

Philippine society today may be described as a federation of conversational communities. There is a language for law and civil procedure. There is a separate language for domestic life. Beneath the veneer of an official linguistic regime, there are the subterranean languages: languages of conspiracy, of regional fraternity, of ethnic community, and racial identity.

The widespread use of print technologies has been associated with the spread of democratic ideals in the last century. That is only one facet of a myriad reality. Print technologies, because of their susceptibility to control and political regulation, have a

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historical underside: they have served as the instruments for superimposing the culture of a minority and minoritizing the lived culture of majorities.

Cinema and the Lingua Franca

The availability -- and subsequent popularity -- of the cinema as a cultural channel made more complex the evolution of a national culture.

The first generation of cinematic products were imported in consumables from the United States. Containing in vivid form images from another locale, they were a window to the world rather than a mirror of ourselves. The medium was seen as a form of entertainment; of escape from an often disheartening reality.

When the means to produce cinematic products locally became possible, the predominantly entertainment format predominated. Filipino cinema -- except for a few, often costly experimentations -- began by mimicking American originals, producing cheap substitutes for the real thing in an idiom appreciable by the masses, consumable by the domestic market.

Early attempts to create an indigenous cinema dealt almost entirely with rural themes and imagery. This was less artistic dictate than commercial necessity. In order to be commercially viable, Filipino movies needed to appeal to as broad a market as possible. Until recently, the vast majority of that market was rural. Movies had to resemble the market.

But in attempting to communicate with the mass market, movies had to deal with the real-life circumstances of the audience. They had to deal with questions of injustice and oppression. The most successful Filipino 'westerns,' for example, dealt with villains who were landgrabbers and made heroes of those who stood up to the oppressors. Movies on the theme of romantic love featured heroic courtships that defied class barriers. War movies, instead of being documentaries on the circumstances of generals and political

leaders, dealt instead with the common heroism of guerilla fighters defying tremendous odds and vanguishing invading armies.

More recently, Filipino cinema began to function as a window to the Other. Dealing with the foibles of the rich, it offered the masses a peak into the cloistered lives of the elite. In order to be comprehensible to the masses, however, these movies had their elite characters speaking the language of the many instead of the peculiar discourse of their cultural ghetto. Conversely, there were movies that probed into hidden lives of the underclasses. Unravelling the tragic fate of those victimized by circumstance, they articulated the hopes and sentiments of those silenced by the conventions of real life.

Because movies, to be commercially viable, must sell to the breadth of the domestic market, the industry required mass acceptance of a common language. That language had to be Tagalog, at least in the casual mode that it is spoken in the Manila area.

As a consequence, cinema became a powerful instrument in the creation of an authentic *lingua franca* for Filipinos. There is only a Manila-based, Tagalog-speaking movie industry. The rules of commercial viability have prevented the emergence of regional cinematic industries. Intermittent efforts to build, for instance, a Cebuano movie industry have consistently failed. It is unlikely that there will be Ilocano, Bicol or Pampango movies. The mathematics of capital and consumer base decide that.

Wielding the tremendous power of the audiovisual form, cinema became the workshop for forging a common conception of a national community. Understood by the power-wielders as a medium principally of entertainment, it was less regimented than print. Infused with the spoken language, it was less constricted by the rigid canons of discourse and style. The stifling formality and directness of the written word, instruments for subjugating the discourse of the minoritized, could not be imposed on cinema.

Cinematic production followed the rules of the market rather than the strictures of stratification. The vice of 'commercialization' also had its virtue: in this medium, the underclass characters speak. In print, with the strict criteria governing proficiency and literacy, the underclass are silenced. The phenomenon is ironical in a compound way: although cinematic production is capital intensive and conducive to oligopolistic control, its content -- by the dictate of commercial viability -- is necessarily democratic.

The idiom of the movies cut across the subnational communities. They defy the rules of discourse that were earlier set by print-based, politically regulated technologies of cultural reproduction. They set the shared symbols of popuar culture. They have inverted the rules of power in society.

Over the last few years, movie stars have invaded the world of politics in large number. Capitalizing on the name-recall they command, they have taken opportunities opened by a free electoral system. There are movie personalities in the Senate, in the House of Representatives, and in many key local executive posts. They do not represent a definable ideological bloc. But they do emphasize the independent power achieved by the medium in the present scheme of things.

The incumbent Vice-President, Joseph Estrada, personifies the independent power of the cinematic medium. A mediocre actor, he has nevertheless portrayed the Filipino Everyman in the movies he did. To that character, he has infused a sense of heroism, a readiness to confront evil and combat injustice. Because of his popularity, Estrada was elected to several terms as a suburban town mayor. He served one unremarkable term in the Senate, before overwhelming all his rivals in the 1992 elections. If presidential elections are held today, the consensus is that Estrada will win it hands down.

The metropolitan, print-based intelligentsia regularly poke fun at Estrada's shortcomings: he has little appreciation for the nuances of legal and political discourse and his grasp of the English language is rather loose. But to the underclass voters, these are precisely his virtues. The cinematic Everyman has become everyman's political symbol. He represents the accessibility of power to those heretofore excluded from the realm of influence by the tight rules of grammar and the exclusionary criteria of elite-defined cultural literacy.

Broadcast and the Mass Culture

The rapid proliferation of broadcast technologies over the last few years altered the dynamic of cultural formation in the Philippines.

The affordability of local transmitters and receivers made possible the nearly total coverage of radio. The sheer number of radio stations along with the instantaneousness of broadcast made

the medium resistant to effective monitoring by the political authority. Even during the depths of dictatorship during the seventies, oppositional radio programs continued to flourish. Even insurgent groups manage occasional broadcasts. Because of the affordability of ordinary radio transmitters, local radio programming, using the (spoken) language of the community and responsive to the concerns of local populations, became possible.

Radio became the medium that resurrected the subdued (by the metropolitan economics of print and cinema) regional languages. It was also an accessible medium. The poor and uneducated could not be denied articulateness in the spoken word. Radio was an entirely oral medium. That characteristic is its point of greatest cultural significance. On radio, each could speak his own language and address his own community. With the exception of speech disability, no one is inhibited by the rules of formal discourse in the free terrain of the radio waves.

Radio time is most economical. At the lowest cost per minute, one could reach the broadest audience. As the medium most accessible to the poor, the underclasses could engage in their own cultural mass production by means of radio. They could speak their mind, weave their myths, disseminate their interpretation of events, deliver their commentaries on the airwaves.

As a consequence, radio programming in the Philippines has a fully developed 'talk-back' characteristic. The most widely patronized radio programs have call-in segments that allow audience participation in determining program contents. Neglected social sectors find in radio a powerful instrument to make their cases known. Because program contents are broadcast in real time, the medium defies censorship.

The radio programs that enjoy widest audiences in the Philippines are those that deliver the hardest-hitting commentaries. Because the listener is free to switch frequencies,

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credibility is a valued asset of radio stations. Most often, credibility positively correlates with independence. There are numerous instances where it could be validly argued that the rules of journalistic responsibility are excessively stretched by radio commentaries. Among Filipino audiences, that is a tolerated excess. The costs of censorship are understood to be many times greater than lapses in discretion among radio commentators.

The highly decentralized nature of radio allows this medium to involve the broadest participation in cultural formation. Here, the spoken language of the underclasses could be reproduced cheaply and efficiently. The opinions and experiences of masses could be shared among themselves. Public opinion could be consolidated by the public acting on its own interest and deciding on the basis of its own semiology.

In a democratic setting, power-holders are constrained to seek popular validation of their rule. To be able to do so, power-holders must conform to the expectations of the actual majority. They must seek acceptance in the linguistic and symbolic terrain of popular radio.

Radio's propensity for segmentation and for desegragating the national idiom is mitigated by the informational expectations of its listeners. By its ability to report, in real time, on events of common significance to the nation, radio networks overshadow the print media as the main channel of national conversation. Unlike the print media, with its tight editorial control and limited space for participation, radio has a high feedback characteristic.

The eroding costs of television receivers dramatically increased the audience for this medium during the last few years. Like radio, television has dramatically improved on its ability to deliver events to a large audience in real time. But because it delivers images along with sound, television is a more compelling medium. Television audiences are able to 'read' events and personalities more closely. Viewers can literally observe the pupils of the eyes of their political leaders and arrive at decision on their level of credibility.

Like the cinema, television production is capital intensive and susceptible to limited ownership. But its strength (and profitability) lies in reaching as broad a base of viewers as possible. Advertising rates are always proportional to viewership. As television receivers become more affordable and as the domestic

market becomes more mass-based, there is greater pressure on the television networks to cohere much more closely with the popular culture.

In its early years, Filipino television was an elite-oriented medium. The costs of television receivers were restrictive and the broadcasts were limited, by available technology, to the metropolitan area. In the beginning it was not a mass-oriented medium and did not at all cater to the rural population. It was primarily an English-speaking medium, delivering canned American programs to an outward-looking cultural and economic elite. News and public affairs programming was, at the onset, a losing proposition. Most of the upper-class viewers were habituated to getting their news from the English-language broadsheets.

The availability of satellite broadcast technologies and the wide dispersal (geographically as well as across the income brackets) of television receivers produced a mass audience for television.

On the one hand, the medium performed.as a convincing window to the world, delivering the sights and sounds of other societies to the living rooms of ordinary households. That had a cosmopolitizing effect on mass society, complemented subsequently by the ease of travel and the profound social repercussions of large-scale labor migration.

On the other hand, television transformed into a powerful medium of domestic conversation. As the more efficient carrier of news, information, and opinion, television overshadowed the significance of print and competed with the reach of radio. Newspaper readership in the Philippines has not grown over the last two decades (despite population growth and economic expansion). By the late eighties, however, news and public affairs programs among the major commercial television networks enjoyed the highest rates of profitability.

From being an exclusive cultural circuit for the elite, television has transformed into the most powerful device shaping the populsr culture. Centered in the metropolis, it has contributed to the homogenization of national discourse. More powerful than radio in its impact on the minds of its audience, television has served as an effective device in forging a national consensus.

On the television screen, the Filipino has finally found the mirror by which he could contemplate his identity.

But the potential of audiovisual communications technology to produce a cultural monolith has been offset by the timely arrival of more advanced digital technologies composing the main wave of the Information Revolution.

Demassified Cultural Formation

The facility with which textual material could now be reproduced by means of photocopiers, mini-offset presses, facsimile transmission and laser printers removes the traditional vulnerability of the print medium: its vulnerability to regulation and control by a small cult of literary brokers.

With the price-accessibility of new technologies, participation in the production of text has been broadened. Language and literary form has been liberated from the strictures of centralized power.

In the Philippines, realization of the democratizing potential of new information technologies could not have happened in a more politically emphatic manner. The uprising of 1986 that overthrew the Marcos dictatorship has often been nicknamed the 'Xerox Revolution' (consequently, the Tiananmen protest was referred to as the 'Fax Revolution' and the Bangkok demonstrations shortly thereafter was nicknamed the 'Cellphone Uprising').

The Marcos regime had tried to control the flow of information by imposing tight censorship of the press and by policing the printeries. The increasing use of photocopiers, however, frustrated all efforts at regulating information. Every photocopier had the potential of becoming a printing press. As with mimeographing machines earlier, government agents tried to devise a way that would allow copiers to be 'fingerprinted' so that the source of the copied material could be readily identified. That was a futile effort. The costs of policing all copiers was simply to large to even become possible.

Many years before the anti-Marcos uprising in the Philippines, the centuries-old monarchy in Iran was overthrown by means of, among others, audiocasettes. The accessibility of the technology to reproduce sound on the same machine used for playback made it impossible to regulate recorded discourse.

During the period of dictatorship in the Philippines, state control of mainstream radio did not prevent the flourishing of an oppositional musical culture. Conveying the demands and the

visions of the democratic resistance, 'alternative music' as it was called in the Philippines, defied political control. Every audiocasette played became a music studio on which songs could be recorded and the tapes reproduced.

The economies of scale that made printeries, radio stations and television networks commercially viable were upset by new communications technologies that allowed the radio reproduction of text, sound and images. Every individual in possession of one machine or the other became a potential cultural producer.

New information technologies have, in effect, created 'irregulation' in the cultural sphere: the impossibility for effective centralized control to be exercised over the processes of cultural production. The final outcome of this is the elimination of the distinct identities of popular and standardized cultures. Broad popular participation in the diverse processes of cultural production eliminated the barriers that used to stand between 'mainstream' and 'subordinated' cultural forms and modes of discourse. With the decentralization of the cultural production processes, cultural forms become, at the same instance, more diverse and yet more accessible.

Autonomy in Cultural Production

Digitalized information technologies dramatically increase the facility for global reproduction and transmission of cultural products. It has now become commonplace to speak of the emergence of a global information highway that will merge into one channel information generated by a variety of media. The computer, television and telephone are quickly being collapsed into one integrated device.

Because of astounding changes in information technologies, there is now much concern over the 'globalization' of culture. Much of the concern over the possible homogenization of culture, involving the dissolution of distinct cultures of diverse communities, is probably alarmist.

There will be, to be sure, a lot of sharing of cultural products that will happen as a consequence of rapid advances in information technologies. But the strength and seductiveness of these new technologies lie precisely in the autonomy they give individual culture producers.

In the same way as large shopping malls have fostered, not a uniformity in consumer tastes, but a remarkable growth of

'boutique' commodities, the so-called 'globalization' of culture will eventually create an enhanced environment for diversity and greater popular participation in cultural production.

In the same way that the end of the Cold War strengthened, rather than weakened, nationalism, the erosion of political boundaries to the flow of information will create a greater sensitivity to the peculiar cultural discourse of actual communities.

The Information Revolution will inconvenience many of the political regimes that now pertain in our region. They will undermine many of the orthodoxies on which we have credited our rising prosperity. But the costs of resisting the Information Revolution will be many times greater than whatever we might want to conserve by resisting it.

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Empowerment

The increasing pervasiveness of new information technologies restores to individual culture producers the ability to produce and reproduce culture. It involves, therefore, a process of empowerment.

This essay began by noting how colonialism and the technologies it brought for more efficiently reproducing its preferred cultures resulted in the distortion of cultural production along the faultlines of uneven power distribution. With the greater democratization of cultural production made possible by the new wave of information technologies, the disparity and inequities in cultural production will be dramatically reduced. Popular empowerment in cultural production will, no doubt, reflect corrections in the power structure.

In an increasingly digitalized cultural world order, we might look forward to the dawn of what might be called Binary Democracy.