

The prestige of image: dangers of a visual culture

The meaning of the word culture is changing. Twenty or thirty years ago, people associated it with outstanding works of the imagination in art, literature and philosophy or with the ideal world of remote and ancient civilization. But nowadays we frequently hear talk of mass culture, pop culture, drug culture, marginal culture or youth culture, or the idea of counterculture is often used by sociologists. This suggests that, for some people, culture is no longer a category of special and very dignified objects and concepts which should be venerated, but a style of living, a way of regarding things or the expression of the values of a group.

If we take the term in this sense, we might say that a great deal of contemporary culture is visual: films TV, cartoons, clothes and adverts promote certain easily recognizable group images. In ordinary conversation, it is interesting to notice how often people now talk of how they perceive somebody or something, instead of saying what they think of them. It is as if image were more real than personality.

Advertising and design, both of which depend exclusively on outward appearance, are now two of the best paid professions. And the fashion among young people for wearing clothes which the makers' label or brand names conspicuously display is causing concern to many parents and teachers. They say that children whose families do not have enough money to buy designer clothes (or simply do not want to) may feel frustrated, deprived or inferior.

Of course, these tendencies might be quite harmless. After all, the young have always liked to show they are different from their parents, and many generations of parents have complained about their children's tastes and dress. But it is perhaps dangerous when passing and superficial tastes become confused in people's minds with the prestige of culture, or when cultural debate gets mixed up with the economic and ideological manipulation of powerful advertising techniques.

The use of word culture may have changed but many of us still think that it is connected with knowledge - knowledge of a community. To be useful, knowledge has to be critical and selective. A visual culture is a culture of appearance; what makes people interesting is not the way they look, but the way they think, talk and act.

1. Answer the following questions using your own words.

- a. What is implied by the statement, "It is as if image were more real than personality?"
- b. Why do many parents and teachers say that some children may feel they aren't as good as the other children and dissatisfied?
- c. What is true knowledge based on?

2. Are the following statements true (T) or false (F)? Support your answer.

a. One modern concept of culture is associated with the way people live.

b. Culture is now less visual than before.

c. Disagreement between the generations is not a new thing.

3. Find a synonym for each of the four words below from these six options: (1 point: 0.25 each)

exclusively connected conspicuously concern venerated passing

a. prominently

b. deeply respected

c. anxiety

d. ephemeral

Part B. Composition (130-150 words approximately).

1. Image is really important for young people.

2. Arguments for and against advertising campaigns.