

Looking at production, reproduction and distribution of cultural artefacts

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1. Art and culture can be framed in various ways. It can be looked at as a way of producing and reproducing the societies we live in. Therefore, the view that culture is *produced to manufacture consent* or to *reproduce in society the ideological values of the dominant class*. Mass culture, while it can be used to create for subversive uses, must contend with ownership of the means of production of culture – media ownership. These issues are the in domain of the culture theory.
2. I am not going to focus on the above set of issues. Instead, I will frame the question differently. I will look at the *products of culture as artefacts*. This is not to argue that they are only artefacts as any other artefacts, but to bring out that even if cultural artefacts are different than others, they -- like any other artefact -- *need to be produced and reproduced*.
3. In the creative process, *technology intervenes in producing and reproducing the artefacts*. Obviously, some forms of art – films, digital art – are clearly possible because of some forms of technology.
4. While the role of technology is obvious in the *creation of certain art forms*, its role is no less ubiquitous in the *reproducing the cultural artefact*. Obviously, the printing press, digital copying has changed the way cultural artefacts are reproduced. The creation of the *mass market is the consequence of “mass reproduction”* of cultural artefacts.
5. A major part of today’s discourse is focussed on the way monopoly control is exercised over reproduction. Copyright is in fact a monopoly over reproduction. In culture, this produces the same problem as patents produce in technology – whoever takes the *last discernible step, receives the monopoly*. The law then focuses on what constitutes the line between the “old” and the “new”.
6. This has been also represented as the “past” controlling the “future”. The reality is that it is really global corporations that control the future by exercising the monopoly rights over reproduction of the past.
7. Interestingly, while the *world of cultural artefacts and technology artefacts* are looked upon as different worlds, they *converge* in terms of how monopoly is exercised and how monopoly is being fought.
8. Copyright monopoly was fought in software using the *Gnu General Public License*. This is a “viral” license that said that if you *took from the commons* to develop your software, you have to *give it back to the commons*. This is different from putting your work in the “public domain”, which could then also be alienated from the public by private appropriation – the last mile development being copyrighted.
9. The equivalent of this for culture has been the *creative commons license*. This allows different forms of usage, the most free allowing even the right to change.
10. Different forms of creative commons licenses:

- a. Authors could give texts under creative commons, which says you can copy it and use it as long as it is not commercially sold.
 - b. You could also give the right to even reproduce and sell.
 - c. And lastly, even change and sell.
11. However, the *viral license* – you have to *give it back to the commons* if you took from commons, still operates.
 12. Technology of printing produced copyright laws. Law was developed to give rights to authors and not to publishers. It was to protect the creators and not to reproducers – the publishers. However, both and copyright monopolies have been extended far beyond what was originally conceived.
 13. However, with growth of publishing and record labels, the monopoly is primarily of the publishers and record labels and not the creators.
 14. The *economics of culture industry* is different from that of other industries – it is primarily built on the monopoly of copyright. It has a “*block buster*” character because of cost of reproduction is small. So a “hit” produces huge profits, some going to the creators but most to the corporations who really own the copyrights.
 15. Interestingly, it is the same in medicine. The large corporations hunt for the block buster drug – drugs that people can pay for. Medicines for tropical diseases are not on the agenda, as people cannot pay for expensive drugs. That is why we have three block buster drugs for erectile dysfunction in the last five years and none for malaria.
 16. In economic terms it means monopoly “rent”. It is this monopoly rent character that brings entertainment, software and pharmaceutical industries under a common rubric. Interestingly, the biggest companies in the stock exchange today – say Fortune 500 list – are entertainment, software and pharma companies.
 17. Digital technology changes this equation. For the first time, *copies are as good as the original*. And the instrument of copying can also be the personal computer, available to very large number of people. Once reproduction is simple and the quality is as good as the original, the only issue is distribution.
 18. Enter the Internet. Distribution becomes a collaborative exercise of the community of people networked by the Internet. This is the world of P2P file transfers – Napster, and its current progenies.
 19. There is a huge battle going on between those who would like to control reproduction and therefore want to “police” PCs and its’ the software and the Free and Open Source Software community.
 20. The question what happens to the creators if reproduction and distribution is so simple? Is copyright obsolete in the digital age?
 21. I believe that there is a potential to liberate the monopoly of reproduction from the corporations and give it back to the creative community. The current system protects only a small section of the creative community who can produce “block busters” for the media corporations. The networked community and creative

- commons is not an answer to existing social forms of control over media, but nevertheless important in this struggle.
22. However, the more interesting issues are not in reproduction but in the production of creative artefacts.
 23. Let us look at the technology used for creative art forms. Writers and painters have always had the advantage in that their instruments of creation have been relatively cheap. Therefore, technology was primarily an issue of reproduction.
 24. Films have been the most expensive form of creative artefacts. It needs equipment and a set of skilled personnel. Earlier, such equipment was expensive and the teams required were also large.
 25. Enter the digital age: costs of equipment have dropped dramatically and the editing platform is a lowly PC.
 26. Will this produce a different form of production? I believe it will. Just imagine a world where film makers put their used and unused footage in a digital archive for the creative community under a creative commons license. How will it affect film making?
 27. Can we create the same way we write software? If communities can network over the Internet to write software artefacts, can this be done for creative artefacts as well?
 28. Will the net change the way we produce, reproduce and distribute creative artefacts? Will it create a more egalitarian creative order from that of today?
 29. As we move from the broadcasting world of TV, will the multicast nature of Internet produce a distribution of power?
 30. The last word. It will not happen by itself. It will not happen if the real world remains dominated by a few centralised corporations. The battle of liberating people from monopoly capital is not different from that of liberating culture from global corporations.