



**General Certificate of Education (A-level)
June 2011**

Communication and Culture

COMM3

(Specification 2625)

Unit 3: Communicating Culture

Report on the Examination

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COMM3: Communicating Culture

With the benefit of two 'live' versions of the COMM3 paper before this one, candidates and their teachers are clearly becoming more comfortable and familiar with the demands of this examination. The quality of work is already showing signs of improvement since the first exam in June 2010. The overall standard of work on this occasion was impressive, not just in the firm grasp of key concepts and conceptual material but also in the diversity and inventiveness of arguments and illustrations. For the most part, candidates benefitted from the kind of preparation which gave them confidence to develop their own ideas and examples, confidence to apply the tools of analysis with creative panache and confidence to challenge received wisdoms, including the premises of the questions themselves.

Most candidates are well aware that they will be rewarded for using a suitably technical register in their responses. Indeed, the 'ability to communicate in the register of communication and culture' is the first of our Assessment Objectives. At one level, candidates may meet this requirement by incorporating appropriate specialist vocabulary into their answers. This is all well and good, but it is now apparent that a substantial number of answers are much more thoroughly immersed in the discursive practice of the subject. Such answers attest to teaching and preparation that is very well tuned in to the central preoccupations of this subject: the scrutiny of everyday life, the reading of texts, the application of critical theoretical approaches and, above all, an intense, enquiring interest in the dynamic nature of contemporary culture.

Needless to say, these positive virtues are not evident in every single response, though it has now become very rare to find an answer that is completely uninformed by any of the above. The purpose of any examination is to discriminate meaningfully and reliably between the performance levels of the candidature. We are confident that this particular examination, together with the careful application of its associated mark scheme has ensured consistent and dependable differentiation. Marks in the range 36-40, including 40 out of 40 for an individual answer were not uncommon. At the other end of the scale a few, but only a very few, answers scored in the range 0-5 where we expect to find those answers which 'do not constitute a serious attempt at the question'.

Section A

Question 1

The topic on this occasion was Disneyization, a concept elaborated by Alan Bryman in his 2004 book *The Disneyization of Society*. Only a minute number of answers referenced Bryman or demonstrated a familiarity with his work beyond the characterisations contained in the question. There was absolutely no expectation that anyone should have studied Disneyization as an explicit topic. It was our intention to devise a self-contained question with self-explanatory arguments requiring only a brief contextualising introduction.

In the event, candidates responded very readily to the Disneyization idea and there were hardly any instances of serious misinterpretation or completely miscued responses. Most answers identified Argument A as a Marxist critique, though some detected the hand of a pessimistic postmodernist or postcolonialist at work. Argument B was variously linked to market liberals, postmodernists, Walt Disney himself or, intriguingly, John Fiske. In truth, it is not the intention of Section A to provide hidden clues to a particular perspective which candidates are invited to track down like bloodhounds. We are looking for reasoned, well-informed analyses of the propositions with effectively deployed conceptual tools. We hope to see examples of candidates using ideas and theoretical models inventively and independently. For this reason, it is not particularly productive having, say, identified Argument A as a Marxist position to then launch into an extended catalogue of 'all I know about Marxism' with no reference whatsoever to the specific points raised by the relevant

argument. As we know, the ‘presence of absence’ is often noted in critical theory and this idea was implicitly put to good use in a number of sound responses. Rather cunningly, such answers used formulations like ‘feminists would note the absence of any reference to patriarchy’ or ‘this argument seems to ignore the cultural imperialist tendencies of Disney’s worldwide expansion’. In these ways, candidates gave themselves the opportunity to *engage critically* with the arguments rather than simply recapitulating the arguments, albeit in more theoretical terms.

This sort of critical engagement put candidates well on the route to fulfilling the key instruction in this task: evaluate. Evaluation implies more than a statement of which argument you agree with or find most convincing. In order to evaluate a position, the merits and the weaknesses must be considered with arguments and evidence used in support. Deliberately, the two opposing arguments suggest the weaknesses of each or, at least, the possibility of alternative interpretations of a particular phenomenon. Answers structured around these principles of evaluation, moving towards informed academic judgements are more likely to be successful than the systematic application of, say, five contrasting theoretical approaches to each argument. The latter is likely to resemble a list of somewhat disconnected and necessarily brief points. We look to reward sophistication and subtlety in the use of theory rather than the sheer number of points made.

Turning to the content of the arguments themselves, we were pleased to note that most candidates found plenty to write about as they grappled with the implications and assumptions of the two positions. Essentially, Disneyization is about a particular style of corporate discourse; a way in which staff (cast members) and institutions as a whole invite customers to share in a comprehensive mutual fantasy. Many candidates recognised this and dwelt at some length and to good effect on the key concept *mode of address*. Of course, the Disneyized fantasy of the Disneyland theme parks themselves is firmly based in the representations and narrative devices of Disney films (and, to some extent, tv shows and video games). Many candidates were influenced by their study of Fictions to offer detailed, well-illustrated discussions of *representation* in Disney films. Strictly speaking, this was tangentially rather than directly relevant to Disneyization *per se*, but was rewarded for knowledge and understanding nonetheless, particularly if the implications were explored in the context of Disneyized experiences.

In a similar vein, some weak answers simply explored the influence of Disney films in general terms with scant attention to the points in the two arguments. In the course of preparing students for COMM3, perhaps it worth reinforcing the point that Question One is about a close and detailed evaluation of the two arguments and not a generalised response to the topic. Some candidates resorted to copying out the arguments piece by piece. On the face of it, this was a complete waste of time and there is certainly no reward for demonstrating duplication skills. However, the very act of writing out portions of the argument often seemed to trigger off useful and relevant ideas, helping floundering candidates to find something useful to say. I’m not for a moment advocating ‘copying out’ as a valid technique, but it is a reminder that time spent really scrutinising the arguments before concocting a response is time well spent.

Section B

Question 2

For the foreseeable future Question Two will remain the *intersections* question. As there was still some evidence that this idea was not fully apprehended, even by those who chose this question, it is worth reiterating here. The intersection is the area of overlap, the relationship between two sites of culture. Candidates will always be expected to explore ideas, arguments and examples that are illustrative of this relationship. For example, a building

(Spaces and Places) may well communicate via structured narratives (Fictions) whilst a consumer product such as perfume (Objects of Desire) may well be insinuated into the aspirations of a potential customer by suggesting a story in which you play a leading role with the perfume as your prop (Fictions).

There are countless opportunities here for invention and creativity in mapping the territory of the chosen intersection. However, it is crucial that candidates selecting this option have a really firm grasp of both cultural sites and have prepared for this question by developing several case study examples that are illustrative of the intersection. Answers which consider the two sites separately and sequentially are missing the point of the question and are unlikely to attain marks any higher than the lower reaches of Level Three at best.

Having said this, there were some really excellent responses to Question Two, often by candidates who had prepared themselves carefully for exactly this sort of challenge, fully aware of the complexity of dealing with two sites.

Question 3

This was not a popular choice, perhaps because many students find the key concepts *mode of address* and *discourse* to be rather daunting. Rather bafflingly, some of those who did attempt the question were clearly confronting one or both of these concepts for the first time, hoping to bluff their way through the theoretical undergrowth. Confusion over these terms, particularly discourse, as also evident in answers to other questions – somewhat alarmingly, as they really are central to the study of Communication and Culture.

Higher up the scale we found examples of answers which demonstrated a firm grasp of relevant key concepts, applying them confidently and interestingly to a range of case studies. Some candidates used the opportunity to reference their own COMM4 coursework studies; a good technique as long as relevance to the question was clearly established. As with Question Two, we have every intention of maintaining the format so that Question Three will always provide an alternative way of approaching a cultural site

Question 4

Answers here were most successful when they demonstrated close, detailed case study research into contrasting examples of Spaces and Places. Many centres specialise in this area and it was really good to see so many instances of thoroughly well grounded local studies: the High Street, the shopping mall, the municipal park and so on. This is not to say that there is anything wrong with case studies focusing on more distant spaces and places, including those which may only have been experienced in mediated form: Las Vegas, Dubai or the South African stadia used in the 2010 World Cup, perhaps. However, the quality of answers suggested that candidates able to draw upon at least one directly experienced, first-hand study were at an advantage, if only because of the level of detail offered. Weaker answers often dealt superficially with many examples.

The idea of the space or place as a text, susceptible to semiotic reading or deconstruction, is now well established. There were some really impressive illustrations of these analytical skills being put into practice. For candidates with this capacity, the question focus on the generation of different meanings presented no problem; they often referred explicitly to the polysemic or ambiguous nature of the texts under discussion. Weaker answers tended to see meaning in terms of individual taste, using formulations such as “I like this shopping centre, but other people don’t”.

Question 5

There is some excellent work being done as candidates prepare for the Fictions site. Once again, we were impressed by the sheer diversity of texts referenced in these answers and by the clear understanding of the cultural role of the fictional text. Many answers demonstrated a highly productive meld of those examples clearly based on whole group study with those of the candidate's own choosing. Fairy tales featured prominently, no doubt for the very good reason that fairy and folk tales are well represented in academic studies of narrative and myth in the reproduction of culture. Unsurprisingly, Disney tales also featured often, especially in answers keen to establish the presence of pernicious stereotypes of gender, ethnicity or class. *Avatar*, *Glee*, *Twilight* and *Harry Potter* were all well represented and, intriguingly, some of the micro-narratives of television advertising and YouTube.

Most answers dwelt almost exclusively on the role of fiction in reinforcing dominant norms, values and patterns of belief concluding, therefore, that 'a culture would be nothing without its fictions' because fictions operate rather straightforwardly as a means of ideological control. This was perfectly legitimate and well-directed to the quotation, although legions of novelists, film-makers, playwrights and so on would, no doubt, be rather depressed to find their work dismissed as little more than elitist propaganda. Some answers did, in truth, find examples of fictions that challenged or undermined dominant cultural norms, concluding that the quotation contains the unjustifiable implication that culture is monolithic.

Unfortunately, a number of candidates failed to reach their potential by simply ignoring the view of fictions expressed in the title, choosing instead to write out their 'fictions essay'. Even high quality examples of this technique failed to gain a foothold in the top mark band forcing us to reiterate the oldest refrain of the examiners' report: "Focus on the question!"

Question 6

Picking up the same point on question focus, there was a much better attempt, by and large, to grapple with the view expressed in the question here. Most candidates acknowledged the contradiction between desiring an object and desiring the status that the object bequeaths and were well able to examine the symbolic potential of cultural products. Critical approaches were used relevantly and explicitly, including Veblen, the Frankfurt School and Mark Paterson's idea of the 'savvy' versus 'sucker' consumer. Many candidates reached back into their AS studies and used Goffman's dramaturgical model to good effect.

This was the most popular, by far, of the Section B questions and it was generally well answered with responses that draw on detailed, conceptually informed examples. If there was a general area of weakness to be found here, it lay less in the failure to acknowledge the implications of 'status' and more in the inability to interrogate the statement or to offer alternative explanations. In such cases, candidates were effectively saying, "Of course I agree with the statement, here are a couple of examples, what more is there to say?" For those candidates prepared to work a little harder with the quotation, rewards were readily available. Some of these examined the subtle distinctions between power and status or discussed the role of objects in symbolising gender identity, group membership or personality. Some inventive answers looked at the role of objects in 'inverted snobbery' and some drew contrasts between the functional and symbolic properties of objects. In these and many other ways, candidates were able to respond relevantly and directly to the question whilst also demonstrating not just 'what I know', but '*what I can do with what I know*'.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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