



P for Knowledge

Just like a vanilla ice, *Sesame Street* is cool. In addition to being one of the longest-running programmes on television and entertaining generation after generation, *Sesame Street* has been one of the most effective centres of knowledge production of the last thirty-something years. The fact is that a felt frog has taught a lot of us a lot of what we know. This is no accident: behind the lovable cast of soft toys and puppets there is a highly varied but unbeatably professional team. The show was conceived with the clear intention of helping kids learn, and during all these years it has done just that. Right from the start it was Joan Ganz Cooney who defined the aims and the orientation of the project, while Jim Henson and Joe Raposo were responsible for giving the necessary charisma to characters such as Elmo, Zoe and Big Bird, so that they could win the hearts of innocent children. Alongside them worked professionals who came from outside of the televisual medium, like the psychologist and Harvard professor Gerald Lesser, or the child psychologists Ed Palmer and Lloyd Morrisett from the Markle Foundation. The programmemakers have always taken careful note of studies that measure children's attention span and concentration capacity, such as those carried out by Daniel Anderson, Elizabeth Lorch and Barbara Flagg. This being so, it should come as no surprise that behind the innocent appearance of a show for kids with a cast of cute and wacky puppets there operates a complex system for the production of learning and knowledge. Everything was worked out to the millimetre: the dialogues, the duration of the sequences, the size of the numbers and letters, the complexity of the sketches, so that each programme contributed a little more to forming the consciousness of the spectators. Even the length of time before a programme could be repeated was based on children's need for reinforcement/repetition and product tolerance. Magnificent (1)

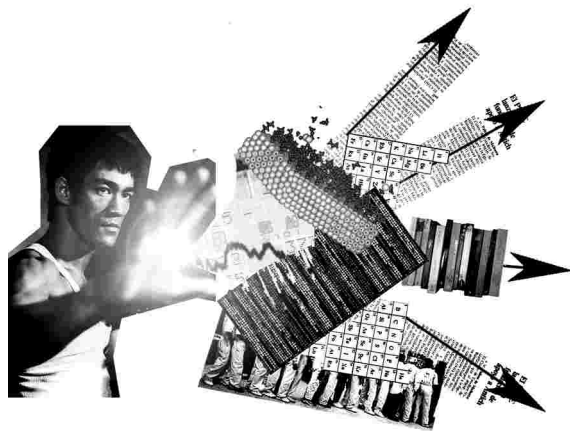
This is all too abstract: we need figures!

Our world is swamped by centres of knowledge production. Some are officially validated as such (universities, academies, schools... '85), but they coexist with a whole range of different elements, individuals and institutions whose lack of official recognition does not make them any less effective at generating lines of thought or discourse. We have become accustomed to hearing various Italian theoreticians say that this immaterial production of knowledge is crucial to understanding —'97among other things—'97 economics, work and contemporary life. Joseph Stiglitz is far removed from this sort of thinking, and in his book *Globalization and Its Discontents* (2) he not only redeems himself from well-deserved blame (he was head of the World Bank for a number of years) but also explains how the economic institutions rate the worth of banks, insurance companies or businesses of other kinds that are going through a bad moment. The decision to inject cash in order to save a company in difficulties depends not on the volume of its assets of different kinds but on its capacity for attracting new clients, its corporate image, its mailing lists, its social influence and so on: in other words, a set of variables that are in principle intangible but quantifiable.

A failing bank that still has a good social image and an extensive network of contacts (to which it can transmit the message "91we have a good image"92) is much easier to return to profitability than one with a smaller debt but whose image has been badly dented. What is of value, then, is its ability to carry on creating a positive image of itself; in other words, the ability to put a message across. The capacity for producing knowledge is a tangible asset. We have to thank Iván for recommending that we read Nonaka and Takeuchi, the authors who have designed the most widely used model for measuring the quantity of knowledge that can be generated by a social group, a company, a teaching institution, etc. Their studies have provided the basis for a fuller understanding of the Japanese industrial and economic boom of the last few decades. Nonaka and Takeuchi argue that the combination of tacit knowledge (the form of knowledge that we all have inscribed in our memory and our body) and explicit knowledge (printed in the pages of books) serves to maximize productivity, and therefore recommend that companies create spaces in which the knowledge possessed by the workers (skills, references, opinions, sexual preferences, etc.) can be developed to the full. This kind of approach is a long way from the rigid



FREE UNIVERSITY!!!



formulas of American business, based on the repetition of learned models. It thus seems clear that managing knowledge is just as important as producing knowledge, and that good knowledge management pays dividends.

Culture and knowledge: an irreconcilable opposition?

We have seen how important the capacity for knowledge production (KP) is for the economy, and it is no less important in the cultural sphere. Given the obvious benefits of effectively managing KP, the contemporary cultural panorama has

seen the emergence of a whole series of initiatives oriented toward assuming the production and management of its knowledge. Denmark, in addition to giving us the seminal figure of Hamlet, offers us one of the most interesting projects in this area, the Copenhagen Free University. For a number of years now, people from a variety of different backgrounds have been getting together in the Free University's modest premises to discuss, share, teach and produce texts that challenge the hegemonic capacity for describing the world claimed by certain institutions. Like any other university, the CFU has temporary residences for visitors (in this case a fold-down mattress... '85) who come to Copenhagen to participate and help develop specific projects on this laudable campus. In London (that wonderful place) there is another very interesting initiative: under the generic name of Flaxman Lodge, a basement hosts meetings between representatives of diverse cultural sectors, who get together to compare and share their levels of precariousness and organize screenings of films, book discussions and so on. In Paris there is the Université Tangente; Monochrom in Vienna, the Facultà di Fuga in Naples and, in Sant Andreu, the SAFU.

We felt we could not pass up the opportunity to endow the Sant Andreu district with a KP centre of its own, so we got down to business. After a lot of negotiations, effort and sweat, we can say without blushing that the university is now up and running. Welcome to the Sant Andreu Free University (SAFU to friends).

Bearing all this in mind, it is no empty boast to say that any cultural process capable of manifesting itself in a KP centre will define the lines of its discourse much more quickly and will prove to be more potent than processes outside of such production centres. What is needed is to liberate cultural and artistic practices from their conceptual isolation in order to introduce them into larger mechanisms, capable of endowing them with meaning; to potentiate the hybridization of ways of thinking so that cultural production can be supported on something more than its own (often derisory) codes. With all of this optimism we are not trying to persuade anybody that attaching a potent discourse to a piece of bad art will make the art better, but we are suggesting that perhaps the mediocre piece will be read with more understanding eyes, just enough for it to pass as good. It also seems clear that although launching projects that work with non-hegemonic forms of knowledge does not amount to redesigning the world, or to achieving large quotas of production of subjecthood, certain forms of group work can be quite useful for realizing concrete objectives. If the objective is to educate kids, *Sesame Street* will do it better, but these *other* initiatives aim to position themselves in niches that are still waiting to be worked, not to set themselves up as a counter-hegemonic value, nor to overshadow some dominant institution. After all, who would dream of challenging the Cookie Monster to a biscuit duel? But if the challenge is downing beers in the Kentucky bar, the Cookie Monster has a good chance of losing... '85

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1. For further information, see Gladwell, Malcolm, *The Tipping Point* (Sp. trans. *La Frontera del éxito*, Espasa Calpe, Madrid, 2001).
2. Stiglitz, Joseph E., *Globalization and Its Discontents* (Sp. trans. *El malestar en la globalización*, Taurus, Madrid, 2003).
3. Nonaka, I & Takeuchi, H. "The knowledge creating company". Oxford University Press 1995



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