

What Is Popular Culture?

A Primer

by Thomas S. Henricks

A current member of the Supreme Court is reputed to have said that while he cannot define pornography, he knows it when he sees it. Most people have a similar understanding of popular culture. Reruns of *M.A.S.H.*, Barbie Dolls, Marvel Comics, posters of Elvis, McDonald's Golden Arches—mass-produced images and products flood modern society. More than we care to admit, such images provide us with topics for our conversations and focal points for our private imaginings. Many of us know the biographical details and personal attributes of fictional characters as well as we know those of our families and friends. And yet most of us know much more *of* popular culture than we know *about* it.

What follows is a primer on popular culture. What is it? What accounts for its origin and development? What is its significance? Should libraries collect it? I will argue that such questions are not trivial. Rather, they encourage all of us to think deeply about the character of culture in the modern world.

What Is Popular Culture?

The reader should not be surprised to learn that there are a number of somewhat different definitions of popular culture.¹ One of the most influential and widely respected of these has been offered by Russel Nye. In Nye's view, popular culture consists of

those productions, both artistic and commercial, designed for mass consumption, which appeal to and express the tastes and understanding of the majority of the public, free of control of minority standards.²

These characteristics distinguish popular culture from other productions (such as "folk" or "elite" art) that are directed toward more limited segments of the population and which tend to be evaluated on

rather different terms. To state the matter simply, popular culture is "culture" which has become or aspires to become "popular."

If scholars disagree strenuously about the value of popular culture today, part of that disagreement stems from their division over the meaning of the term "culture" itself. Within the humanities, some writers and social critics have held that "culture" refers only to the most elevated or artistically refined forms of human expression. As a champion of this view, the late-nineteenth century English poet and social critic Matthew Arnold put it, culture is "the best that has been thought and known in the world, the study and pursuit

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of perfection."³ In such a view, popular culture—or the popularization of perfection—is an oxymoron.

Other writers in the humanities and almost everyone in the social sciences tend to see "culture" in a much broader and less evaluative way. In this sense culture refers to all the humanly created resources available to members of a society. These resources include not only material things such as clothing, buildings, computers, and postage stamps, but also non-material, invisible creations such as beliefs, norms, and values. Within the social sciences then, the study of culture tends to be concerned with how such resources are produced, distributed, and received by individuals and organizations. Studying the "popularization" of culture is largely studying how and why certain ideas and artifacts become part of the daily lives of great numbers of people.

Seen in this way, popular culture stud-

ies are part of a much wider discussion about the institutionalization of culture in modern societies. However, as Nye's definition emphasizes, most students of this topic restrict themselves to certain types of culture—artistic and commercial productions designed for a wide group of consumers. Some scholars expand this concept slightly by adding social events such as circuses, fairs, sporting events, and the like that attract broad-based audiences or include celebrities.⁴ Even with this focus the field is a vast one. Picking up a copy of the *Journal of Popular Culture* or leafing through the program of the annual meeting of the Popular Culture Association, one finds an overwhelming array of subjects: histories of the Ferris wheel, studies of Japanese television shows, chili cook-offs, gospel music, Miss America pageants, detective novels, Little League, campaign buttons, puppetry, and similar topics.

With so much included, the reader may wonder what is left out. Traditionally popular culture is opposed to artistic expressions, commercial products, and social events that have a narrow appeal due both to their sophistication (aesthetically, morally, or intellectually) and to their expense. "Classic" novels, symphonic music, sophisticated jazz, ballet and certain forms of modern dance, "serious" poetry, academic art, exotica in the world of food and fashion and consumer goods: such matters seem inaccessible, by inclination or constraint, to the millions. Of course the boundaries of "high" culture are not as clear as they seem. Certain Tchaikovsky symphonies, Shakespeare plays, or Mark Twain novels may appeal to wide audiences at particular times or appear in shortened or altered forms that make them easier to digest.

At the other extreme, popular culture is typically distinguished from "folk" culture, the supposedly unsophisticated expressions of remote and commonly poor subcultures. Religious painting on metal

roofing, whittling, whistling, pot likker, herbal remedies, street games, spray painting in alleys — such expressions are directed toward the immediate community that understands and shares these sentiments. As in the case of high art, however, these products can be mass-produced or otherwise brought into the mass market in altered forms for limited periods of time.

Popular culture occupies a middle ground. While geared primarily toward middle and working class sensibilities, it transcends, or attempts to transcend, differences of race, class, gender, region, age, religion, and ethnicity. One may dismiss this “culture for the millions” as the homogenization of experience, as the manufacture of endless loaves of white bread. Or one may see these efforts as contributing to a truly public culture in a divided world.

The Origin and Development of Popular Culture

Although some authors disagree,⁵ the origin of popular culture is usually traced to the dawning of the industrial world in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Of course, there really is no clear beginning. The development of a thoroughly popular culture depends upon a set of organizations capable of producing and disseminating products of various sorts to a vast audience; that audience in turn must be able to appreciate and afford these products. In other words, the history of popular culture is largely a history of social and technological inventions that standardize experience.

A long-range view of this process includes the role of the Catholic Church in the development of early and medieval European culture. Catholicism helped standardize religious expression and provided people with a regimen of daily rituals and periodic festivals. Later, the evolving nation-state imposed another framework of public obligation over diverse groups. The development of private and then public schools helped unify what was known and considered important. The rise of the factory system exposed millions to a clock-bound, regimented style of work and to a greater uniformity of products. Other social inventions such as governmental and judicial gatherings, taverns, fairs, sporting houses and grounds, and coffee houses also contributed to public culture.

The great break with the provincial world, however, occurred with the Industrial Revolution.⁶ With the rise of machine power came factories and wage labor. Displaced from the agricultural world, hundreds of thousands streamed into the cities. If the cities were breeding grounds for a now familiar set of social problems, they were also the settings for a more vibrant public life. Ideas and goods were

being produced at unprecedented rates, and money was the lubricant.

This interaction was facilitated by a number of inventions in communications and transportation. The development of movable type in the fifteenth century facilitated literacy and led ultimately to the cheap newspapers and periodicals of the 1700s. In the nineteenth century, the speed of ideas was accelerated by the telegraph (1844), the laying of the Atlantic Cable (1866), and the radio (1895). Such twentieth century inventions as television and the computer ushered in what has been referred to by its more enthusiastic interpreters as the Information Age.⁷

Just as these revolutions in communication gave a new meaning to the “public” mind, so changes in transportation brought goods and people together. The roadways of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries permitted interaction at all times of year. The coaches and canals of this period were central elements of this change, as were the railroads and steamships of the 1830s. Twentieth century inventions such as the automobile, super-highway, and airplane again accelerated the process.

To appreciate the ways in which these various inventions intertwined, consider as one example the mail-order catalog in late nineteenth century America.⁸ For Sears or Wards to sell products in this fashion, there had to be ways of mass-producing both goods and the catalog itself cheaply, an inexpensive system of rural postal delivery, railroads to transport the goods, and a public both literate enough to read the catalog and wealthy enough to afford its products.

Social critics feared the Industrial Revolution because it freed working people from many of the rural social institutions (church, community, and landed estate) that had confined and directed them. It allowed members of the working classes to roam the streets of the cities as relatively anonymous individuals with money in their pockets and their own ideas about how to spend it. This process, and the criticism that attends it, continue still.

Evaluating Popular Culture

Intellectuals of all stripes have criticized popular arts and products as resources that are at their best inferior and at worst dangerous to the inhabitants of modern society. This criticism is not new. The plays of the French dramatists during the Enlightenment were thought by many to be inferior diversions, as was a new and danger-

ous literary form, the novel.⁹ Much of what is being said now was said then.

As Herbert Gans has demonstrated, the attack on popular culture has been centered on a number of key points.¹⁰ The first concerns popular culture's supposed defects as a (typically) commercial enterprise. Popular culture producers and distributors depend on a extremely wide group of consumers; therefore, elements that are more eccentric, thought-provoking, or complicated tend to be eliminated. What remains is a series of quick-and-easy sensations. Furthermore, this business orientation allows decisions about marketability to overwhelm the artistic judgments of the creators themselves. Popular culture is thought to pander to its audience's baser or more ordinary desires, while “high culture” supposedly forces audiences to confront the thought processes of its creators.

This relationship between high and popular culture is not simply a case of uneasy coexistence; for popular culture, it has been charged, pollutes the higher form. Content from high culture works is borrowed and then re-presented in uncomplicated, digested forms. Furthermore, the profit potential of popular culture may lure artists and intellectuals away

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from “serious” work, or tempt them to modify that work to achieve a wider audience. Just as popular culture lowers the aspirations of the creator, so it lowers the visions of its audience. Audiences may have their only exposure to high culture through the popular media or, worse, come to prefer the easier, more accessible form to the original. The book becomes judged by the movie; the historical figure, by his or her television incarnation. In grossest terms, popular culture is said to be vulgar and even pathological. Too much time spent at the movies or watching television produces lazy, unthoughtful people with violent tendencies and short attention spans.

As indicated, popular culture has taken a beating from critics of both the left and right.¹¹ Leftists have tended to see popular culture as an opiate of the people, a set of grand distractions controlled by big busi-

ness and, to a lesser degree, government. Manipulative producers stupefy the public with an avalanche of crass, commercial visions of individual success. Right-wing critics have tended to see the public's appetite for this as evidence that the masses are ignorant and perhaps dangerous. By choosing such material, ordinary people lower the quality of public life and in effect drive away more serious work. In the former vision, the partakers of popular culture are cheerful robots; in the latter they are boors.

Like other defenders of popular culture, Gans argues that the differences between high and popular culture are less extreme than the critics acknowledge. For example, a little knowledge of the contemporary art or music worlds suggests that there are profound commercial values here as well. A "cult of celebrity" flourishes in both, with predictable effects on marketing strategies, investment potential, and opportunities for further work. Similarly, the distinction in quality between popular and other kinds of culture is probably overblown; commonly, critics pick upon the crassest examples of popular culture and compare these to the best examples of high

that the distinction between "high" and "popular" culture in America is largely an invention of the nineteenth century when more established Anglo-Saxon groups sought to distinguish themselves from the waves of immigrants. Identification of the "classics" or "good" art was one way of imposing cultural order on an increasingly diverse society. Just as this process sanctified the tastes of the dominant group, so it denied the rights of less well-placed people to choose their own habits and expressions.

Should Libraries Collect Popular Culture?

The debate over what materials to collect is as old as the public library itself. In 1852, two prominent members of the first board of trustees of the Boston Public Library disagreed strenuously over the nature of the collection. Harvard professor George Ticknor felt that more popular works should be included for the benefit of all social classes; former Harvard president Edward Everett disagreed.¹³ One hundred and forty years later, the debate has been made more complicated by explosions in printed materials and other information formats such as audio and video tapes and discs, and computer software. When one adds to this prints, photographs, advertising materials, paraphernalia of political campaigns, and other artifacts with significant informational content, the decision about what to collect becomes even more difficult, and the line between the library and the museum (or seemingly, the flea market) becomes blurred.

As a sociologist rather than a librarian, I hesitate to pontificate on the obligations of librarianship. However, it does seem to me that the challenge for the modern library is not only to strike a balance between the educationally sound and the broadly appealing in each format, but also to build individualized collections that save for posterity the concerns and preoccupations of those who lived in the twentieth century. In this sense, the collection of popular culture materials seems indispensable. Current popular culture items are relatively inexpensive to acquire and appealing to the public; typically they contain great ranges of information about the taken-for-granted realities of everyday life such as fashion, language expressions, physical gestures, and mannerisms. Saved for even a decade, they provide startling insights into cultural style of the preceding years. If consideration is

given not only to circulating such materials but to building specialized collections, then libraries of all sorts can participate in the maintenance of our national heritage.

References

¹ See Christopher D. Geist and Jack Nachbar, eds., *The Popular Culture Reader*, 3d edition (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Press, 1983), 1-35. Also, Thomas M. Kando, *Leisure and Popular Culture in Transition* (St. Louis: C. V. Mosby, 1975), chapter 3.

² Russel B. Nye, "Notes on a Rationale for Popular Culture," in *The Popular Culture Reader*, 24. See also Nye's *The Unembarrassed Muse: The Popular Arts in America* (New York: Dial Press, 1970).

³ The implications of this quote and its impact on American thought are discussed in Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 223-24.

⁴ See "Introduction: What is Popular Culture?" in *The Popular Culture Reader*, 1-12.

⁵ See, for example, Josie P. Campbell, ed., *Popular Culture in the Middle Ages* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1986).

⁶ See Robert Nisbet, *The Sociological Tradition* (New York: Basic Books, 1966) for a discussion of the social changes caused by the Industrial Revolution.

⁷ See, for example, Alvin Toffler, *The Third Wave* (New York: William Morrow, 1980).

⁸ For a discussion of the mail order catalog, see Daniel Boorstin, *The Americans: The Democratic Experience* (New York: Random House, 1973), 118-29.

⁹ For an excellent treatment of the resistance to early forms of popular culture, see Leo Lowenthal, *Literature, Popular Culture, and Society* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1961), chapter 1.

¹⁰ Herbert Gans, *Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation of Taste* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), chapter 1.

¹¹ See Bernard Rosenberg and David White, eds., *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1957); also see Norman Jacobs, *Culture for the Millions* (Princeton, N.J.: Van Nostrand, 1961).

¹² See Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, especially chapter 3, "Order, Culture, and Hierarchy."

¹³ See Robert Lee, "The People's University — The Educational Objective of the Public Library," in Michael Harris, ed., *Reader in American Library History* (Washington, D.C.: Microcard, 1971), 117-24.

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culture. It should also be emphasized that the "effects data" concerning popular culture is unclear. When considering adults or others with multiple sources of information, there is little evidence to support the notion that people have been stupefied or made violent by exposure to popular culture. Indeed, it can be argued that some segments of the population have been "elevated" by exposure to such essentially middle class materials. Finally, some question whether there is a mass audience at all. Instead, each person's many different social characteristics such as race, gender, ethnicity, education, class, and age may influence his or her tastes and understanding of mass-produced materials.

In a recent work, Lawrence Levine argued that the condemnation of popular culture is less an intellectual or aesthetic matter than a social one.¹² Levine claims