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AmCult 103

10/20/14

Midterm Paper

Raymond Williams’ text “Culture”, articulates that culture is a complicated term with many historical and geographical variations in meaning (36). Thus the idea of a counterculture must be equally if not more complicated. In Umberto Eco’s work, “Does Counterculture Exist?” the anthropological definition of culture is defined to be, “comprising the complex of institutions, myths, rites, laws, beliefs, codified everyday behavior, value systems and material techniques elaborated by a group of humans” (119). Thus in this system a “counterculture is simply an alternate culture the mainstream culture doesn’t absorb” (Eco 120). On the other hand, Duncombe states cultural resistance as simply, “culture that is used, consciously or unconsciously, effectively or not, to resist and/or change the dominant political, economic, and/or social structure” (5). In other words it is any act in opposition to what a currently accepted as the norm culture. This paper will analyze the methods through which Green Day’s song “American Idiot” constitutes a form of rebellion and fits the definition of a countercultural practice.

Green Day is a rock band, originally from Berkeley, California, that identified strongly with the California punk scene in during the 1990s. In 2004, when the song American Idiot was released the band consisted of three members. “Childhood friends Billie Joe Armstrong, the main guitarist and vocals and Mike Dirnt, the bass player, formed their first band, Sweet Children, in Rodeo, California when they were 14 years old, in 1986” ("Biography, History, Band." 1). Tre Cool, joined the band four years later in 1990, as the lead drummer ("Biography, History, Band." 1). Through out the 20th century Green Day grew in popularity and their success skyrocketed when the band won its first Grammy for Best Alternative Music Album in 1995.

In the 21st century Green Day’s album *American Idiot* was a massive success. The titular song from the album, “American Idiot”, was originally released as a single, peaked at number sixty-one in the Billboard Charts in the United States, and stayed on the top 100 for twenty weeks ("Green Day." 1). We can see the title of the song itself demonstrates resistance, by implying that the typical American is a fool. As a whole the song criticizes the American agenda and mindset of the mid 2000’s and disapproves of the ignorance it believes envelops so much of society.

As we examine the song lyrics we begin to see this message more clearly. “American Idiot” by Green Day starts out by saying, “Don’t wanna be an American idiot/Don’t want a nation under the new media” (1-2). Here the author is condemning how society doesn’t think for itself but rather accepts the values and beliefs portrayed by television and politics and just mechanically follow what the masses do. Green Day then continues to say “All across the alien nation/Where everything isn’t meant to be okay” (6-7). This can be interpreted as a confrontation on the politics of the Bush Administration. The album American Idiot, which was released right before the presidential election of 2004, “offered one of the sharpest and loudest voices of protest against the Bush Administration and the America it continued to shape” ("Green Day Never Gives Up." 1). The band is urging the public to realize that promises of security and safety made by this administration, cannot be kept, and that despite what they are being reinsured, everything will not be okay.

When the band says, “Well maybe I’m the faggot America/But not a part of redneck agenda” (11-12), it’s criticizing the government’s view on gay marriage, and refusing to agree with what is accepted despite the labels being given to them as a result.

The message, however, is only as effective as the method through which it’s conveyed. As Duncombe states, “Politics can also be transmitted through the *form* culture takes. It is one things to read lyrics on a page, quite another to hear them sung with emotion or laid over a danceable beat” (6). The structure and tone of the song play a large role in transmitting the meaning on the song. The beat of “American Idiot” picks up quickly with the loud strumming of the guitar, and a booming bass repeatedly playing in the background. This gives the song an uplifting and motivational feeling and gives the listener the sense of being invincible, as if he or she can achieve anything. Thus the tone of the song is optimistic, and despite the criticism, is patriotic because it implies there is still hope for the country. As a whole, the song has a slightly cacophonic in sound, as the strumming starts and stops the strumming rather erotically. This emphasizes how life is not always smooth and easy going, and that things aren’t necessarily going to be okay, regardless of how propaganda and media may make things seem.

The music video for this song uses imagery and symbolism to communicate its message as well. The artists in the video are all dressed wearing black clothing, with heavy eyeliner. Black is a color that symbolizes independence and will power, both of which are strong themes for the song. In addition the makeup and tattoos giving the song a rebellious edge. The artists also use the flag for symbolism. Throughout the video the American flag is seen in shades of green, in honor of the band’s name, instead of the traditional red, white, and blue. This in a way this takes away from a lot of the patriot element and also calls for a change in the norm. As the video continues we see repeating close up clips of the flag and the color is slowly fading away, a metaphor to how the country is loosing a focused path and vision and solely following others’ propaganda. In other words the original goals of freedom and objectivity are fading. This symbolism quickly escalates, and towards the end of the video the entire flag starts bleeding the color green, leaving a flag without any stripes left in the end. Although this may seem like a conventionally unpatriotic move, we see that the band is rebelling the country as the way it is today, and not the values and ideas of the nation as a whole.

In an interview with Rolling Stone magazine, Anderson, the band’s main guitarist, states, “I made it [“American Idiot”] to give people a reason to think for themselves. It was supposed to be a catalyst” (Fricke 3). The song was an intentional form of cultural resistance. But the irony was that it used the same media it so disapproved and accused of propaganda, as the medium to publicize its own song. When the lyrics are “Television dreams of tomorrow/weren’t not the ones who’re meant to follow” (18-19), the band addresses this controversy, by including itself in the collection of people who should not be followed. It is as Eco characterizes a parasitic countercultural model, as a system that can only exist feeding of the creations or productions of the larger dominant society (123).

Overall the song “American Idiot” by Green Day, opposed the way of society during a certain time period and with the intent of catalyzing change, thus it constituted a form of rebellion. They are the individuals that, as Duncombe defines, “challenge the dominant system to its very core… and are able to create a new vision of the future for the public” (7-8).

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