Pop Culture: An Overview

Tim Delaney sets the scene for our philosophical consideration of popular stuff.

The term 'popular culture' holds different meanings depending on who's defining it and the context of use. It is generally recognized as the *vernacular* or *people's* culture that predominates in a society at a point in time. As Brummett explains in *Rhetorical Dimensions of Popular Culture*, pop culture involves the aspects of social life most actively involved in by the public. As the 'culture of the people', popular culture is determined by the interactions between people in their everyday activities: styles of dress, the use of slang, greeting rituals and the foods that people eat are all examples of popular culture. Popular culture is also informed by the mass media.

There are a number of generally agreed elements comprising popular culture. For example, popular culture encompasses the most immediate and contemporary aspects of our lives. These aspects are often subject to rapid change, especially in a highly technological world in which people are brought closer and closer by omnipresent media. Certain standards and commonly held beliefs are reflected in pop culture. Because of its commonality, pop culture both reflects and influences people's everyday life (see eg Petracca and Sorapure, *Common Culture*). Furthermore, brands can attain pop iconic status (eg the Nike swoosh or McDonald's golden arches). However, iconic brands, as other aspects of popular culture, may rise and fall.

With these fundamental aspects in mind, popular culture may be defined as *the products and forms of expression and identity that are frequently encountered or widely accepted, commonly liked or approved, and characteristic of a particular society at a given time*. Ray Browne in his essay 'Folklore to Populore' offers a similar definition: "Popular culture consists of the aspects of attitudes, behaviors, beliefs, customs, and tastes that define the

people of any society. Popular culture is, in the historic use of term, the *culture of the people*."

Popular culture allows large heterogeneous masses of people to identify collectively. It serves an inclusionary role in society as it unites the masses on ideals of acceptable forms of behavior. Along with forging a sense of identity which binds individuals to the greater society, consuming pop culture items often enhances an individual's prestige in their peer group. Further, popular culture, unlike folk or high culture, provides individuals with a chance to change the prevailing sentiments and norms of behavior, as we shall see. So popular culture appeals to people because it provides opportunities for both individual happiness and communal bonding.

Examples of Popular Culture

Examples of popular culture come from a wide array of genres, including popular music, print, cyber culture, sports, entertainment, leisure, fads, advertising and television. Sports and television are arguably two of the most widely consumed examples of popular culture, and they also represent two examples of popular culture with great staying power.

Sports are played and watched by members of all social classes, but (tautologously) the masses are responsible for the huge popularity of sports. Some sporting events, such as the World Cup and the Olympics, are consumed by a world community. Sports are pervasive in most societies and represent a major part of many people's lives. Showing allegiance to a team as a means of self-identification is a common behavior. Further, cheering for a sports team or a favorite athlete is a way any individual can become part of popular culture, as I and Tim Madigan explain in our new book *The Sociology of Sport*.

Many people watch numerous hours of television everyday. It is such a prevalent aspect of contemporary culture it is difficult to imagine life without it. There are those who believe TV is responsible for the dumbing down of society; that children watch too much television; and that the couch potato syndrome has contributed to the epidemic of childhood obesity. The globally

popular TV show *The Simpsons* provides us with an interesting perspective on television. In the episode 'Sideshow Bob's Last Gleaming' (#137), while doing time in prison, Sideshow Bob becomes a critic of television. Although he was once a regular on *The Krusty the Clown Show*, Bob has become obsessed by television's harmful effect on society. Bob argues that everyone's lives would be much richer if TV were done away with. As a result, he devises a scheme to detonate a nuclear bomb unless all television is abolished in Springfield. Unable to locate Bob, Springfield's city officials meet to discuss Bob's demands of abolishing TV. A panicky Krusty proclaims, "Would it really be worth living in a world without television? I think the survivors would envy the dead." Although there are people who agree with Sideshow Bob, the masses would more likely agree with Krusty: that living in a world without television is not really living. It is even more difficult to imagine a world without popular culture.

Folk and High Culture

Popular culture is usually distinguished from folk and high culture. In some ways, folk culture is similar to pop culture because of the mass participation involved. Folk culture, however, represents the traditional way of doing things. Consequently, it is not as amendable to change and is much more static than popular culture.

Folk culture represents a simpler lifestyle, that is generally conservative, largely self-sufficient, and often characteristic of rural life. Radical innovation is generally discouraged. Group members are expected to conform to traditional modes of behavior adopted by the community. Folk culture is local in orientation, and non-commercial. In short, folk culture promises stability, whereas popular culture is generally looking for something new or fresh. Because of this, popular culture often represents an intrusion and a challenge to folk culture. Conversely, folk culture rarely intrudes upon popular culture. There are times when certain elements of folk culture (eg Turkish rugs, Mexican blankets and Irish fairy tales) find their way into the world of pop culture. Generally, when items of folk culture are appropriated and marketed by the popular culture, the folk items gradually lose their original form.

A key characteristic of popular culture is its accessibility to the masses. It is, after all, the culture of the people. High culture, on the other hand, is not mass produced, nor meant for mass consumption. It belongs to the social elite; the fine arts, opera, theatre, and high intellectualism are associated with the upper socioeconomic classes. Items of high culture often require extensive experience, training, or reflection to be appreciated. Such items seldom cross over to the pop culture domain. Consequently, popular culture is generally looked (down) upon as being superficial when compared to the sophistication of high culture. (This does not mean that social elites do not participate in popular culture or that members of the masses do not participate in high culture.)

The Formation of Popular Culture

Through most of human history, the masses were influenced by dogmatic forms of rule and traditions dictated by local folk culture. Most people were spread throughout small cities and rural areas – conditions that were not conducive to a 'popular' culture. With the beginning of the Industrial era (late eighteenth century), the rural masses began to migrate to cities, leading to the urbanization of most Western societies.

Urbanization is a key ingredient in the formation of popular culture. People who once lived in homogeneous small villages or farms found themselves in crowded cities marked by great cultural diversity. These diverse people would come to see themselves as a 'collectivity' as a result of common, or popular, forms of expression. Thus, many scholars trace the beginning of the popular culture phenomenon to the rise of the middle class brought on by the Industrial Revolution.

Industrialization also brought with it mass production; developments in transportation, such as the steam locomotive and the steamship; advancements in building technology; increased literacy; improvements in education and public health; and the emergence of efficient forms of commercial printing, representing the first step in the formation of a mass media (eg the penny press, magazines, and pamphlets). All of these factors contributed to the blossoming of popular culture. By the start of

the twentieth century, the print industry mass-produced illustrated newspapers and periodicals, as well as serialized novels and detective stories. Newspapers served as the best source of information for a public with a growing interest in social and economic affairs. The ideas expressed in print provided a starting point for popular discourse on all sorts of topics. Fueled by further technological growth, popular culture was greatly impacted by the emerging forms of mass media throughout the twentieth century. Films, broadcast radio and television all had a profound influence on culture.

So urbanization, industrialization, the mass media and the continuous growth in technology since the late 1700s, have all been significant factors in the formation of popular culture. These continue to be factors shaping pop culture today.

Sources of Popular Culture

There are numerous sources of popular culture. As implied above, a primary source is the mass media, especially popular music, film, television, radio, video games, books and the internet. In addition, advances in communication allows for the greater transmission of ideas by word of mouth, especially via cell phones. Many TV programs, such as *American Idol* and the *Last Comic Standing,* provide viewers with a phone number so that they can vote for a contestant. This combining of pop culture sources represents a novel way of increasing public interest, and further fuels the mass production of commodities. Popular culture is also influenced by professional entities that provide the public with information. These sources include the news media, scientific and scholarly publications, and 'expert' opinion from people considered an authority in their field. For example, a news station reporting on a specific topic, say the effects of playing violent video games, will seek a noted psychologist or sociologist who has published in this area. This strategy is a useful way of influencing the public and may shape their collective opinions on a particular subject. At the very least, it provides a starting point for public discourse and differing opinions. News stations often allow viewers to call or email in their opinions, which may be shared with the public.

A seemingly contradictory source of popular culture is individualism. Urban culture has not only provided a common ground for the masses, it has inspired ideals of individualistic aspirations. In the United States, a society formed on the premise of individual rights, there are theoretically no limitations to what an individual might accomplish. An individual may choose to participate in all that is 'popular' for popularity's sake; or they may choose a course of action off the beaten track. At times, these 'pathfinders' affect popular culture by their individuality. Of course, once a unique style becomes adopted by others, it ceases to remain unique. It becomes, popular.