

Popular culture: Introduction to central ideas and debates

Culture

Two common associations with the word “culture”:

1. Cultured – e.g. They are a cultured family.
2. Culture as marked by the daily life and routine of people – what they eat, what they wear, the language they speak.

These two meanings of culture themselves align on either side of the binary of high culture and low culture, where high culture belongs to the elites while low culture or popular culture belongs to the common people or the masses.

High culture

Matthew Arnold in “Culture and Anarchy” – Culture as that which is “the best that has been thought and said.”

F.R. Leavis in *The Great Tradition* talks about great literary writers such as Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James etc. He was invested in the establishment of a literary canon worthy of literary studies in English departments.

These ideas were criticized for being aligned only with the beliefs and culture of the elite – why should a small and privileged group of men decide what is good literature/culturally important?

Questions against such ideas came not only from non-elites in Britain (Raymond Williams, one of the pioneers in the field of cultural studies, was from a working class background and his writing is influenced by it), but also from former colonies of Britain, leading to the establishment of subfields within literary studies such as Postcolonial Studies and New Literatures of the World.

Popular culture

Challenges to elite ideas of what is culturally important were also followed by the realization that everyday routines and experiences of people are equally important cultural sites as they given an insight into the daily lives of people.

Popular Culture, as the culture of the people, has been defined in different ways:

1. Folk culture – folk songs, art, rituals etc.
2. A collection of everyday practices of a group of people (definition comes from anthropology) – what they eat, wear, festivals they celebrate etc.
3. Counterculture – examples include forms such as hip-hop, graffiti etc., usually linked with the working classes
4. Mass culture – cultural products produced and consumed at a mass scale

Popular Culture as Mass Culture

Dwight Macdonald: Culture that is “manufactured for the market.”

Ray Browne: “all of those elements of life which are not narrowly intellectual or creatively elitist and which are generally though not necessarily disseminated through mass media.”

Historically linked to industrialization, globalization (Americanisation), and in India, liberalisation following the economic policy reforms of 1991-92.

Popular Culture	Elite Culture
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• more formulaic, standardized, mass produced, mainly commercial	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• more “inventional,” often implicitly critical of popular formulas through irony or satire; is both commercial and noncommercial
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• standards of excellence not well-defined: success measured by popularity	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• standards of excellence defined by persons with credentials (education, taste, etc.); success measured by critical or scholarly reception
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• purpose is more to entertain than to enlighten—to meet audience needs and desires	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• purpose is more to edify, enlighten, criticize, raise consciousness than to entertain—to meet refined needs and desires of an audience

Popular culture has been criticized for being formulaic/repetitive. Seen as playing to the audiences, not mentally stimulating, dumbing down audiences, not challenging them – all motivated by the desire to sell more and make profit.

Why study popular culture?

For something to become popular it must connect with its audience, which means it must reflect the realities and discourse of the time. This is what makes popular culture an important site of study – it is **reflective** of its times. It can also be **reformulative** – can pick up on less mainstream/ newly emerging ideas and debates; it gives them greater visibility by introducing them into popular discourse.

Our aim

The aim of this course will be to pick up different contemporary popular cultural texts and examine them in light of one main question: what does this text tell me about the times in which it has been created and consumed?