

Popular Culture

Concept: Popular Culture

Author: Latham Hunter , McMaster University

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Description Definitions of popular culture tend to be wide-ranging, given the flexibility in the meanings of both "popular" and "culture." The term can indicate a specific set of traditions enacted by a specific group of people, or the mass homogenization of contemporary society. It can indicate the commercial culture brought to us through mass produced goods (including the mass media), or the simple elements of everyday life. Ultimately, the study of popular culture is concerned with how relations of power are structured through the practices and texts which make up the bulk of people's daily activity. As such, it often focuses on popular texts — romance novels, Hollywood films, advertisements, sporting events, video games, contemporary music, and so on — and on the conditions of their production and consumption.

The concept of "popular culture" has spread quickly in academia and now challenges the traditional perception of "high culture" as intrinsically more valuable to our development and enlightenment as human beings. There are two basic theoretical stances from which the study of popular culture has been approached. The first stance holds that people who enjoy popular culture are part of an uninformed, undiscerning mass which simply accepts and enjoys whatever is packaged by the culture industry as mass entertainment. The other is based on the idea that popular culture encourages populist power: it envisages popular culture as a giant storeroom from which we may select those elements which appeal to us or meet our needs. In mass culture theory, simple entertainment is perceived as a kind of opiate for the masses, whereas in populist theory entertainment is not simple at all, but rather a vital and empowering way in which people may abandon the pressures of everyday life and social subjugation by selecting or rejecting whatever cultural products do not meet this need. This populist stance clearly suggests a greater degree of individual autonomy in our society.



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There is an emerging sense among scholars that with the arrival of globalization, we are entering a "post-cultural" phase. A new awareness of the multiplicity of cultures, and their subsequent blending in globalized fora, has led to the blurring and breaking down of the boundaries that separate and define cultures. For instance, the growing sense that the Western ideals of human rights should spread around the globe subverts certain cultural traditions which do not fall in line with those ideals. The ensuing clash often results in a gradual eradication of the cultural tradition (as with female circumcision, for example), or a reshaping of that tradition into a more globally "acceptable" form. Ultimately, we are left with a less local, more global, version of a culture which is less distinct from other cultures, given that it has been informed by an increasingly world-wide set of ethics, ideals, and cultural products. The latter of these are, more and more, defined by their hybridity. In music, for example, a famous English pop singer recently teamed with an Arabic vocalist to create a song that samples equally from Western urban dance beats and traditional Middle Eastern patterns and instrumentations.

This emerging hybrid cultural production is, in part, produced and circulated thanks to the increased digitalization of our culture, which allows for the rapid and wide-ranging dissemination of information and products (particularly music, computer software, and visual media). Such a trend obscures the physical origins of cultural production — the idea of something being produced in a specific place — which unsettles some of the more traditional markers of cultural authority; markers such as nation, race, and language. The subversion of these elements, based in large part

on shared, clearly defined geographies, raises new questions about the stability, jurisdiction, and authenticity traditionally associated with place and origins, and those who would define themselves as belonging to, coming from, or owning place. The computer software industry, in particular, has been the locus of such questioning, as corporations, copyright laws, and national and legal jurisdictions struggle to determine what forms of dissemination are permissible, and whether or not they can be controlled or limited accordingly. We can see this kind of contestation in the legal battles over music file sharing on the Internet.

Perhaps the most crucial way in which globalization has influenced popular culture is in its development of flourishing export processing zones. These zones, commonly in third world countries, are now the sites of production for the bulk of Western cultural products and are another example of how the authority and authenticity of place is being obfuscated in contemporary popular culture. It is in this respect that autonomy is most threatened by globalization, as millions of workers' basic human freedoms are eroded through locked factory compounds, slave wages, and dangerous working conditions. In the Western world, a slightly less tangible erosion of individual autonomy has established itself thanks to the rise of third world export processing zones: multinational corporations typically based in the West are now primarily concerned with the production and marketing of a lifestyle, or brand, which has led not only to a service-based Western economy where jobs provide access to a "lifestyle," branded product (as at retail outlets such as Starbucks and Nike stores), but also to a culture where a rising consumer debt load indicates the degree to which individuals are willing to sacrifice their own resources in order to purchase goods which will, supposedly, indicate a kind of cultural belonging, or mastery. Typically, these "lifestyle brands" are American, but are marketed and coveted globally, leading to criticism of the United States as a cultural empire which runs roughshod over other cultures and their cultural products, thus creating a kind of global homogenization.