

POPULAR CULTURE AND THE ACADEMIC COMMUNITY:  
THE CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF POPULAR CULTURE

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In today's complex society the academic community is wielding greater and greater influence, but usually off campus rather than on. There is a growing gap between life on the campus and that facing the student when he is away from school. Consequently students feel disenchanting with campus life and their professors and are alienated because they feel that the life they are taught about and lead on campus is unreal. Harold Howe, Commissioner of the United States Office of Education under President Johnson, pointed out that young people are justly demanding that their education prepare them for the complicated world that actually exists. There is, he insisted, a great need for radical change in university departmental structure and sometimes anachronistic curricula, for interdisciplinary courses, to bring them up to modern life and its challenges.

Curriculum-conservative academics, however, often do not see the necessity of leading change, and they are learning only slowly to exploit the total environment, not parts in isolation. They must in fact realize both the potential and the threat of modern life. As the astute British critic Raymond Williams has observed: "The human crisis is always a crisis of understanding; what we generally understand we can do.... There are ideas, and ways of thinking, with the seeds of life in them, and there are others, perhaps deep in our minds, with the seeds of a general death. Our measure of success in recognizing these kinds, and in naming them making possible their common recognition, may be literally the measure of our future."

An important key to the understanding of the world around us is our popular culture.

"Popular Culture" is, admittedly, an indistinct term. Scarcely any two commentators agree on a definition. Most critics, in fact, do not attempt to define it. Many people agree, however, that there are perhaps four levels of culture: Elite, Popular, Mass and Folk, with none a discrete unity unaffected by the other levels. Other observers divide the total culture of a people into "minority" and "majority" categories.

The British critic Raymond Williams, mentioned above, defines a total culture as "the body of intellectual and imaginative work which each generation receives" as its tradition. For the Center for the Study of Popular Culture, then, the working definition of "popular culture" is those elements of life which are not primarily intellectual or creative, or those which in transmission---mainly through the mass media---have been largely stripped of their purely intellectual or purely creative content. "Popular culture" thus embraces all levels of our society and culture other than the Elite---"popular," "mass," and "folk."

The Center's field of endeavor, therefore, is larger than those of other disciplines and "interdisciplinary curricula," broader, for example, than that of programs in folklore. Folklore is more interested in a single stratum of society than with the various levels of present-day existence. The Center, on the other hand, though also concerned in historical background, is first of all interested in current life and all its ramifications. The Center intends to make the present world more understandable to students and faculty; its ultimate goal is to make democracy more comprehensible and viable.

The serious study of "popular culture" has been neglected in American colleges and universities. One reason has been that elitist critics of our culture---notably such persons as Dwight MacDonal and Edmund Wilson---have always insisted that whatever was widespread was artistically and esthetically deficient, therefore unworthy of study. They taught that "culture," to be worthwhile, must necessarily be limited to the elite, the aristocratic and the minority. They felt that mass or popular culture---especially as it appeared in the mass media---would vitiate real culture. This attitude persists today among some of the younger critics. William Gass, for example, the Purdue University esthetician and critic, takes the position that "the products of popular culture, by and large, have no more esthetic quality than a brick in the street."

Gass' statement is perhaps an extreme of the elitist critic's point of view. The force of numerous critics' arguments is weakening such attitudes. Popular culture has a dimension, a thrust and---most important---a reality that has nothing to do with its esthetic accomplishment. To Marshall McLuhan the arts of the mass media, especially, must be evaluated on their own terms. To him it is not the content of these arts but the total impact of media and form that is important, for from this total impact comes the totality of depth that he approves of. McLuhan's point of view is demonstrated by the talented young stylist Tom Wolfe, who thumbs his nose at the prejudice and snobbery that has always held at arm's length all claims of validity if not esthetic accomplishment of the "culture" of the masses.

Susan Sontag, a brilliant young critic and esthetic, is even more effective in bludgeoning the old point of view. Far from alarmed at the apparent new esthetic, she sees that it is merely a change in attitude, not a death's blow to culture and art. To her art has merely changed its function; it is now a "new kind of instrument...for modifying consciousness and organizing new modes of sensibility."

Critics and society condemn and exclude culture at great loss and peril to themselves. Popular culture is the voice---and the muscle---of the people, the movements---sometimes glacial---of the past, present and future. It is a kind of audio-video profile of a nation. It pictures the smiles and it echoes the signs of contentment. It also points to the locations of fissures in the crust of society through which seethes and explodes the lava of public discontent. To the critics Hall and Whannel this is probably one of the most important aspects of popular culture, for there is a direct connection between popular art and high art, and the artist of the popular work "helps the serious artist to focus the actual world...to sharpen his observations and to detect the large but hidden movements of society."

All elements of popular culture speak to and reveal much about a nation's life.

An attitude toward the esthetic accomplishment of popular culture that is becoming increasingly acceptable is that held by the philosopher Abraham Kaplan: that popular culture has considerable accomplishment and even more real possibilities and it is developing but has not realized its full potential. All levels draw from one another. The Mass level, being largely imitative, draws from other levels without altering much. Elite art draws heavily from both folk and, perhaps to a slightly lesser degree, Popular art. Popular art derives from Elite and Mass and Folk, but does not take any without subjecting it to a greater or lesser amount of creative change. That popular culture has "no more esthetic quality than a brick in the street," as Gass asserts, or at least no more esthetic potential is a contention refuted in one blow by America's greatest writers---Hawthorne, Melville, Whitman, Twain, to name only four---as well as the most outstanding writers of all times and countries ---Homer, Shakespeare, Dickens, Dostoevski, Tolstoi, for example.

Melville provides an excellent case in point. Moby Dick is the supreme achievement in American creative literature and one of the half dozen greatest ever written anywhere. Its splendor derives from the sum total of its many parts. It is a blend of nearly all elements of all cultures of mid-nineteenth century America. Melville took all the culture around him---trivial and profound---Transcendentalism and the plumbing of the depths of the human experience, but also demonism, popular theatre, the shanghai gesture, jokes about pills and gas on the stomach, etc., and boiling them in the try-works of his fiery genius transmuted them into the highest art.

The relationship between folk culture and popular and elite cultures is still debatable. In many ways folk culture borrows from and imitates both. Historically folk art has come more from the hall than from the hovel, has depended more upon the truly creative---though "unsophisticated"---spirit than the mediocre imitator. "Sir Patrick Spens," one of the finest songs ever written, was originally the product of a single creative genius. Today's best folklore-to-be, that is, the most esthetically satisfying folklore that is working into tradition today, is that of such people as Woody Guthrie, Larry Gorman and such individual artists.

To a disappointingly large number of observers, however, folklore is felt to be the same as popular culture. To another large number of people, folklore derives directly from popular culture, with only a slight time lag. To them today's popular culture is tomorrow's folklore. Both notions seem out of line.

Esthetically folk culture has two levels. There is superb folk art and there is deficient, mediocre folk art. In many ways folk art is near to Elite art, despite the lack of sophistication that much folk art has. Elite art has much that is inferior, as even the most prejudiced critic must admit. In motivation of artist, also, folk art is close to Elite, for like the Elite artist the truly accomplished folk artist values individualism and personal expression, he explores new forms and seeks new depths in expression and feeling. But there are at the same time workers in folklore who are mere imitators, just trying to get a-

long---exactly like their counterparts in mass culture.

Thus all elements in our culture (or cultures) are closely related and constitute one long continuum. Perhaps the best metaphorical figure for all is that of the flattened ellipsis, or a lens. In the center, largest in bulk and easiest seen through is Popular Culture, which includes Mass Culture. On either side of the lens are High and Folk cultures, both looking fundamentally alike in many respects and both having a great deal in common, for both have keen direct vision and extensive peripheral insight and acumen. All four derive in many ways and to many degrees from one another, and the lines of demarcation between any two are indistinct and mobile.

But all four are colored by the realities of the culture that sees through them. Facing the realities of modern culture admittedly can be an uneasy confrontation. But to fail to confront and understand these realities---their complexities but genuine potentials---is to bring to today's world with its awesome power and potential the ostrich-like attitudes of earlier days and centuries that are no longer tenable or permissible.

The Center for the Study of Popular Culture at Bowling Green University, with Ray B. Browne its Director, was created specifically to try to change these attitudes. The program of the Center will work in numerous ways toward its goal. The curriculum touches both undergraduate and graduate students. For the undergraduate there will be a wide interdisciplinary major and minor in popular culture. We believe it is important to train undergraduates to examine critically this aspect of the milieu in which they are living. At this time only a few colleges and universities offer this opportunity, and on a much more limited scale than the Center intends to pursue.

Advanced degrees that are somewhat "unconventional" will be offered. There will be a minimum requirement in foreign languages because we believe that English is sufficiently widespread in the world today to allow scholars to get along in studies that are mainly contemporary. Standard dissertations will not be required; instead, demonstration of agility to do scholarly, critical or creative work in the area of a student's major interest will be necessary. All students will be asked to do a "publishable" critical study of 50 to 100 pages on some aspect of popular culture, or a professional creative work of thirty minutes duration. All graduate students will be required to take a double major---one in popular culture and one in some standard academic discipline, such as art, history, literature, political science, sociology, speech, theatre, etc.

In addition to the academic courses offered, the Center will engage in various other activities. One of the most important will be a series of Institutes, of which five kinds are planned for as many groups: 1) as an elective for Bowling Green University seniors graduating with teaching certificates; 2) for underprivileged youths as an introductory course for college preparation; 3) for older people who have been educationally deprived in life; 4) for high school teachers who are not aware of the full potential of popular culture in their curricula; 5) for college and university professors who are interested in the subject and might want to initiate courses on their own campuses.

Other activities will center on Conferences (both in the summer and

throughout the regular academic year), Seminars and numerous public lectures closely related to popular culture.

One of the significant thrusts of the Center will result from the special library holdings in popular culture. At the moment, this library---housed in its own special room in the main library---offers more than twenty thousand volumes specifically on popular culture, ranging from broad surveys such as medicine, history, sociology, the occult, agronomy, astrology, etc., to literary works such as the complete writings of Zane Grey and Mrs. E.D.E.N. Southworth. And there are thousands of related volumes in the stacks of the main library. These holdings, both in the popular culture and the main libraries, are being added to regularly.

Another outstanding feature of the Popular Culture Library is its record holdings. At this time these consist of more than 25,000 transcriptions and records---33 RPM, 45 RPM, 78 RPM. These are being augmented at the rate of 2500 per month. There are also special holdings donated from the archives of various radio stations across the country, such as tapes of speeches by Roosevelt, Churchill, Truman and others.

In many ways perhaps one of the outstanding features of the record library is our unique series called Living Archives of Literature, which consist of taped interviews with writers discussing themselves, their work and their attitudes toward society, popular culture and their role in the field of literature.

All the activities of the Center are strengthened by the presence of two publishing ventures---the Journal of Popular Culture, a quarterly that is already having considerable impact on the academic world, and the Bowling Green University Popular Press, which intends to do in book form what the Journal does in magazine form.

With the outstanding faculty and students that the Center is bound to attract, and with the growing importance of Popular Culture in the academic field, the future of the Center for the Study of Popular Culture seems assured.