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THE REPRESENTATION AND SIGNIFICANCE OF POPULAR CULTURE IN MODERN SOCIETY

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Abstract

The works of Popular Culture are often defined as what the ordinary people prefer rather than what appeals to the educated elite class. Popular Culture has always been a site for debate regarding its importance and acceptability compared to 'high' culture. For a long time, the works of Popular Culture was dismissed as a lowly form of art for their commercial nature and natural appeal to the masses. In this article, the researcher attempts to locate the concept of Popular Culture and its significance in a society that is very dynamic. The researcher is endeavouring to throw some light on the misconceptions about the works of Popular Culture and, at the same time, reflecting upon its significance in the changes it brought in society. Moreover, the article also discusses how Popular Culture has been and still is a location for a biased and highly sexualised representation of women.

Introduction

It is not easy to define Popular Culture with one definition. In common terms, it can be explained as a culture that is widely favoured by the common public. Popular Culture is often used synonymously as mass culture, consumerist culture, paraliterature, etc. (Storey 5- 13; Pawling 2) If not always, then mostly it is defined in comparison to high culture. As believed by some critics, Popular Culture is a 'leftover' of the high culture. They claim that Popular Culture is "mass-produced commercial culture, whereas high culture is the result of an individual act of creation." (Storey 6) Popular Culture is majorly referred to as the work produced during and after the 20th century.

As described by Marcel Danesi, Popular Culture is a culture that "appeals to our corporeal selves, challenging traditional morals and aesthetic

pretentiousness while entertaining us with its earthiness." (Danesi 1) Instead of being confined to any tradition that is artistic in nature Popular Culture rejects and at the same time adapts these traditions. Popular Culture arises from new trends and is continuously changing. What was once considered a Popular Culture can now be considered high culture, e.g., Shakespeare. "It is thus populist, unpredictable, and ephemeral, reflecting the everchanging tastes of one generation after another." (Danesi 4) Danesi says that the reason why pop culture is short-lived and era-specific is that it is a commodity culture.

Popular Culture vs Highbrow Culture

Popular fiction is also known as genre fiction. It can be defined in various ways but is commonly known as a broadly popular genre among people and has a huge commercial success. Popular fiction is largely known as the opposite of serious fiction.

“Popular fiction may often fall into stereotyping, vulgarity, sensation and the fashionably disposable whilst serious fiction may be ‘literary’, elitist and cerebral, yet both meet in the bestseller, confusing category expectations and spoiling a convenient reading of purchaser demographics.” (Bloom 3) As Marc Angenot comments, “‘paraliterature’ occupies the space outside the literary enclosure, as a forbidden, taboo, and perhaps degraded product’, against which the ‘self of literature proper is forged.” (Pawling 2)

Conventions and inventions combine to make popular fiction. As Cawelti opines, conventions are elements that are “usually quite specific to a particular culture and period and do not mean the same outside this specific context.” (Cawelti 5 qt. in UKEssays.com) Some examples of conventions are stereotyped characters, commonly known metaphors, accepted ideas. In contrast, inventions are the elements that are “uniquely imagined by the creators” (Ashley 87 qt. in UKEssays.com). Both of these elements have a significant role in the cultural context. “While conventions represent the shared values of a society, inventions introduce new concepts to the society. Conventions maintain the traditions, customs, and stability of a defined culture; inventions bring changes, new values.” (UKEssays.com) As the readers are able to relate to the novels in terms of their beliefs and interests, it results in the popularity of popular fiction. As stated by Cawelti, it brings them “satisfaction and emotional security” (Cawelti 9) Similarly, inventions provide them with new understanding of the world around them and also a place to break free from the monotony of everyday life.

The major genres that come under the paradigm of popular fiction are crime fiction, fantasy, romance, science fiction, western, inspirational, and horror. Looking at the statistics, Blooms stated in his book that Josephine Cox; Dick Francis; Catherine Cookson; R. L. Stine; Danielle Steel; Jack Higgins; James Patterson; Ruth Rendell; Janet and Allan Ahlberg; Jaqueline Wilson Agatha Christie: writers of the genre of romance, detective fiction, family sagas, gothic horror, and thrillers were the eleven authors who were most popular that

were borrowed from libraries in 2007. (Bloom 5)

There are two different categories to analyse the success of a writer: commercial success and artistic success. To define these two, commercial success is measure by the entries in the bestseller lists, whereas artistic success is designated by winning literary awards. The similarity can also be traced back to the difference observed between the ‘Popular Culture system’ and ‘highbrow culture system’. (Verboord 396)

The Department of Popular Culture was established by Ray B Brown at BGSU in 1972. Brown was also the first editor of the Journal of Popular Culture, the Popular Press and the Journal of American Culture. Socialist writer and academic Raymond Williams has discussed the difference between Highbrow Culture and Popular Culture to a great extent in his famous essay *On High and Popular Culture*.

Andy Warhol, an American artist, film director, and producer, is strongly linked with pop art in Popular culture and media. All his works investigate the correlation between artistic expression, advertising, and celebrity culture that gained traction in the 1960s, which are inclusive of painting, silkscreening, photography, film, and sculpture. However, Frederic Jameson describes pop culture as a “late degenerative phase in the evolution of capitalism”. (Danesi 47) Pop culture has been criticised by Jameson from a perspective of Neo-Marxism. However, the criticism fails to recognise that pop culture is not a ‘philosophical’ culture and is rather a ‘hip’ culture. (Danesi 48)

John Storey provided six definitions of Popular Culture. He defines it as the culture of people, leftover of high culture, mass-produced commercial culture, American culture. Structuralism looks at Popular Culture as a sort of ideological machine that reproduces the status quo. Culture that originated from ‘the people’. However, the Marxist approach deems Popular Culture as a topic up for debate in between the ‘resistance’ of subordinate groups and the forces of ‘incorporation’ working towards the interests of leading groups. According to him, Popular Culture emerged following industrialisation and urbanisation.

Rethinking Popular Culture and Media edited by Özlem Sensoy, Elizabeth Marshall defines Popular Culture as “In many ways, Popular Culture is the polaroid snapshot or Facebook photo page that documents our lives in the social world; it is a backdrop of day-to day life. And its power is both diffuse and indisputable. From Disney to Barbie to MySpace, youth today navigate a range of Popular Culture.” Though this quotation specifically mentions youth as a consumer of Popular Culture, there is no specific group that is not deeply immersed in Popular Culture. Popular Culture does not need to be associated with youth only, we all are affected and influence by Popular culture equally age being no bar. The kids and old people alike watch television that is direct manifestation of Popular Culture. Kids play with toys, and the oldest of people who read magazines which are again a very significant part of Popular Culture.

Marcel Danesi defined the features of Popular Culture as collage, bricolage, spectacle, nostalgia, celebrity culture, occultism, pastiche, and laughter. Popular Culture has a very specific kind of theatrical spectacle. *Collage*, *Bricolage*, and *Pastiche* are the three French words that are frequently used to describe pop culture. *Collage* can be described as an artistic design developed by collecting some pieces together and pasting them onto a canvas or another surface. The term *bricolage* emphasises a unifying structure to the seemingly disparate components of a spectacle or text. The act of mixing brings the disparate elements together. Pastiche is a term used in painting to describe an admixture of elements intended to imitate or satirise another work or style. A pastiche pattern can be found in many facets of pop culture. For instance, consider the mix of news that is broadcasted on daily television, which combines news about crime and tragedies with those involving the accomplishments of pop stars.

The business of Popular Culture feeds on the nostalgic sentiments of one’s youth. Popular Culture widely deals with the themes of crime and thrillers and especially serial killers. It delves into occultism which is borne out by the popularity of horoscopes and doomsday documentaries on television. Out of all the other genres in Popular Culture, mystery and

thriller, narratives are the most popular. Popular Culture produces most of our celebrities. They are both condemned and celebrated by the common public, e.g., Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley. Danesi said that differentiating between celebrities and icons is part of the aim of pop culture studies. Finally, laughter and humour are something that common people crave, as observed by Arthur Asa Berger. Humour as a genre, over time, has become a major part of Popular Culture, and in some ways, it is an exercise in laughter and its psychological benefits. (Danesi 27-32)

Women in Popular Culture

Various literary critics (Ross and Byerly, 2004; Bielby and Bielby, 1992, 1996; Van Zoonen, 1994) have supported the argument that women have been systematically marginalised in production as well as performance practices in media and cultural industries, and this has been extensively established in the past few decades. Similarly, the representation of women often tends to be highly stereotypical and traditional in cultural and media productions. (ibid.)

Despite being increasingly successful in the bestseller lists in various countries, there still remains a dearth of female authors winning literary awards, “no more than 30% of the awards are won by women in the US and Germany, while in France women comprise less than one-fifth of all winners.” (Verboord 404) The major reason for the influx of women writers in bestseller lists is the increasing presence of the genre of Popular Culture in the bestsellers lists. This demonstrates the fact that gender inequality is more in Highbrow Culture than in Popular Culture. This could also be substantiated by Verboord’s argument that in the case of attainment of higher social status by institutional agents the gender inequality also becomes even stronger. (396-404)

Verboord argued that there are more female writers in the genre of Popular Culture fiction writings than in highbrow Culture based on her study in which she analysed the tendencies of gender inequality in the divide between the highbrow culture and popular culture in fiction book that were produced from 1960 to 2009 in three

countries France, Germany and the United States. (Verboord)

There are several critical theories connected with Popular Culture. These theories analyse the overall consequences that Popular Culture has brought about to contemporary societies. These are Marxist theory, propaganda theory, feminist and postfeminist theory, postmodern theory, psychological theory, sociological theory, semiotic approaches, structuralist and poststructuralist theory, mythology theory, code theory, and transgression theory. (Danesi)

Marxist theorists were one of the first critiques of pop culture, they say it as a negative social philosophical force. They belonged to the Frankfurt School, which included Walter Benjamin (1892–1940), Theodor W. Adorno (1903–1969), Max Horkheimer (1895–1973), Erich Fromm (1900–1980), Herbert Marcuse (1898–1979), and Leo Lowenthal (1900–1993). They saw pop culture as a commercial and commodity culture. Theodor W. Adorno critiqued Popular Culture and capitalism and gave the concept of the culture industry. He described Walt Disney as the most dangerous man in America. Using the philosophy of history as a framework, Max Horkheimer examined the poverty of mass culture. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was a book he co-wrote with Theodor Adorno. In this book, they criticised Popular Culture as “the product of a culture industry whose goal was to stupefy the masses with endless mass-produced copies of the same thing.”

Feminist and postfeminist theorists also critiqued pop culture as “degrading to women and a source of influence in promoting violence against women.” (Danesi 45) They criticised pop culture for projecting females in stereotypical roles of either “motherly homemakers” or “sexual cheerleaders”. (ibid.) Nevertheless, the role of gender in pop culture was very ambiguous. The same portrayal of a female body that was seen as an objectification and male voyeurism became a crucial part of women’s liberation. Eroticism became a part of women’s liberation. As pointed out by Phoca and Wright, Postfeminist theorists see the display of women's bodies on the stage of pop culture as a

transgressive form of dialogue rather than exploitation. Madonna, the American pop star, understands this better than anyone else.

Though even in Popular Culture, women were seen as morally corrupt if they expressed their sexuality, since they were ‘part of the show’, their role was seen differently by the women’s liberation moment (the 1950s Maria Elena Buszek considered the so-called subversive images of women in sensual films, pinups, and other media as a sight that made sexual femininity an open and public event rather than a repressed component of the feminine gender. (Danesi 281)

In Popular Culture, the line between sexuality and sexism is blurry. Eve Ensler in *The Vagina Monologues* explains that “violence can be stopped if women’s sexuality is understood, openly and frankly and not shrouded in myth and misunderstanding.” (ibid.)

Talking about the lack of recognition of the feminist work in Popular Culture, various critics have insisted upon the priority of its work. John Caughie commented on the ‘absence of feminist work around Popular Culture’. In contrast, Simon Frith is of the opinion that women have indeed talked about Popular Culture. However, they have never been heard, and what they talk about is usually not considered Popular Culture. (Modleski 47)

Mass Culture has been time and again accused of trying to ‘homogenise social reality’. The role of gender in resisting this is more than what has been recognised as just another position of resistance among many others. Therefore, Fredric Jameson says:

“The only authentic cultural production today has seemed to be that which can draw on the collective experience of marginal pockets of the social life of the world system: black literature and blues, British working-class rock, women’s literature, gay literature, the roman québécois, the literature of the Third World; and this production is possible only to the degree to which these forms of collective life or collective solidarity have not yet been fully penetrated by the market and by the commodity system.” (Jameson 148)

Since women have been present in the earliest of the historical accounts of mass culture, according to Modleski, it is very obvious that there is an urgent need for feminist critique to be involved in all the stages of arguments that revolve in and around the mass culture. It can be best exemplified by the famous phrase of Hawthorne 'mobs of scribbling women'. This clearly shows the degeneration of the taste of culture was blamed on women as they ruined it by sentimentalising it. The orthodox position of literary historians condemns the mass culture as a 'feminised' culture. This argument can be backed up by Ann Douglas's reading of *The Feminization of American Culture*. Douglas is a critic, literary historian, and self-proclaimed feminist. (Modleski 48)

In Popular Culture, the images of women were stereotyped as consumers and of men as producers. Modleski argued, on analysing Manuel Puig's celebrated novel *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, that femininity has always been allied with escapism, weakness, and passivity in the film. "It is the vivid image of girls prostrate on chaise-longues, immersed in their worthless novels, that has provided historical preparation for the practice of countless critics who persist in equating femininity, consumption, and reading, on the one hand, and masculinity, production, and writing on the other." (Modleski 49-50)

Conclusion

Popular Culture has always been and still is both appealing and controversial. Even though there are more female writers in Popular Culture than Highbrow Culture, the representation of women in Popular Culture often tends to be highly stereotypical and traditional in cultural and media productions. Different approaches pose different questions, but the question that all approaches have in common is that who decides what a "good" culture is and what is a "tasteless" culture? This is the reason why there is always an ongoing debate about what makes up a legitimate or acceptable culture.

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