

Popular Culture: Towards a Definition

Abstract

Popular culture is a culture of mass appeal. It gives importance to hopes and aspirations of the people. It is to reach the common man and the largest part of the population. It consists of those works and events which are meant for mass consumption and for the taste of majority. The spread of urbanization and the rise of industrialization have shaped the rise of popular culture. Another cause of the growth of popular culture is the rise of middle class. The aim of the paper is to make an attempt to define popular in relation to folk culture and elite culture.

Keywords: Consciousness, Civilization, Custom, Survival, Intellectual, Popular, Entertainment, Elite, Folk, Appeal.

Introduction

Popular culture springs from society. It is a reflection of the hopes and aspirations, fears and insecurities, and the inter-personal relationships of people constituting that society. It is shaped by, and shapes, the consciousness of an entire civilisation or race. It is an inseparable part of life and a permanent record of what people believe in and what they are. Popular culture is varied in its forms and diverse in its implications. It has been defined as all the experiences in life shared by people in common. Michael J. Bell has given an apt definition of popular culture which gives importance to its purpose, form and function. He comments:

At its simplest popular culture is the culture of mass appeal. A creation is popular when it is created to respond to the experiences and values of the majority, when it is produced in such a way that the majority have lay access to it, and when it can be understood and interpreted by the majority without the aid of special knowledge or experience (Inge 1982:443).

A more insightful definition of popular culture has been given by the historians, such as Norman F. Cantor and Michael S. Werthman. According to them man's culture is a complex phenomenon. It is an expression of all he knows, all he possesses and all he does. It is a congregation of his laws, beliefs and morals. His customs and ideas are significant part of his culture. The whole range of actions of human beings can be divided between two categories as work and play. Some actions are done by necessity and some by choice. A lot of actions are done by the people when they are engaged in the struggle for survival. Man spends all his energy on avoiding sufferings. All these actions are known as works which are done on the spur of necessity. In work man does not find the spontaneous expression of his faculties. On the other hand, play is the spontaneous expression of one's instincts. It is done for its own sake. It has no ulterior utility. The historians comment on popular culture by differentiating work from play. According to them, "Popular culture may be seen as all those things man does and all those artefacts he creates for their own sake; all that diverts his mind and body from the sad business of life. Popular culture is really what people do when they are not working; it is man in pursuit of pleasure, excitement, beauty and fulfilment" (Inge 1989: xxvi).

Popular culture is distinctly different from high culture. High culture is complex and intricate in its structure. Its efficiency depends upon originality and novelty. The function of high culture is to utilise the experience of the individual. Creation is meant to be aesthetically perfect. It is an act in pursuit of truth and beauty. "Art for art's sake" is the most appropriate phrase for these creations. Popular culture, on the other hand, expresses the common experience of the larger part of the population. The creative act in the field of popular culture is a social act with clear-cut social consequences. It is "art for society's sake". Popular culture provides a proper outlet for our emotional tendencies. It has a certain effect which makes us feel better physically and psychologically. High culture appeals directly to the intellect and arouses the noble aspirations of people. It is to be protected through the different phases of

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time and the changing social and political conditions. Popular culture is to reach the common man and the largest part of the population. Its success depends on how widely it is distributed and how many people it reaches. Popular culture appeals to our basic emotions. It pleases the non-intellectual side of human nature.

An act or event is termed to be popular, if it is meant to reach and please as many people as possible. And, popular culture precisely aims at that. To define in a simple way, popular culture is the culture with a mass appeal.

Popular, elite and folk cultures are distinguishable from each other. They define different kinds of experiences. The artists of each culture try to define something different. Elite creators try to produce something which is the result of their personal self and production of their aesthetic experiences. They are consciously aesthetic and their products are new and daring. Folk culture, on the other hand, is the culture of everyday life, of every man. It is founded on traditional knowledge and practice. It holds the communities together from generation to generation. The artists of folk culture work within a particular pattern of experience.

Folk culture is a culture of continuity. It comes from the past and passes to the present. It is governed by traditions and customs. It is based on the expectations and experiences of daily life lived as most people do most of the time. It will continue largely as it has gone before.

Popular culture works for the large mass of people. It seeks to satisfy as many people as possible. It is generally associated with the social forces which are essential for its creation. The forces of urbanization and industrialization have shaped the creation of popular culture. The term "popular culture" describes a cultural setup that could not have appeared in Western civilization before the late eighteenth century. One of the causes for the growth and development of popular culture is the great explosion of population in Europe and America. People settled in urban or semi-urban areas and developed some common social, economic and cultural characteristics. Popular culture came into existence as people developed some popular means of entertainment and engagement. Another cause for the rise of popular culture was the emergence of a middle class society. The upper class gradually lost control of cultural standards. With the spread of education and literacy, the middle class supplied a new kind of audience, as well as a new form of entertainment based on the tastes of the larger part of the population. Popular culture is also an off-spring of modern technological culture. It is wholly dependent upon the modern techniques for its wide appeal and expansion. The technocratic society has created not only the market for popular culture but also its form, techniques and subject matter. The meaning of the term "popular culture" arises from the different meanings available for the word "popular". Something is popular when it is intended for ordinary people. Something is popular when it is accepted by the people in general. The word culture has a general, as well as a specialised meaning. First, it is the sum-total of the values and attitudes which a society expresses

through language, myths, rituals. Culture also means the refinement of human mind. According to Bigsby (1975:24):

Popular culture is sometimes defined as the attitudes and values of those excluded from the intellectual elite and expressed through myths, rituals and life styles specific to this excluded group, and sometimes as the popular, as opposed to the intellectual arts.

Folk culture is communal art rooted in daily experience. In its effect folk culture is seen as a pre-industrial, pre-literate popular culture. As stated earlier, the rapid economic changes in the nineteenth century brought about a high increase in the middle class society. The spread of literacy which created a reading public is a necessary cause for the coming up of the post-industrial popular culture. Folk culture is subject to gradual change, whereas popular culture has no development. It has no sense of history. For example, the pop songs of the twenties in any significant sense are like the pop songs of the sixties. One type of pop song has some similarity to the primitive form. In this regard C.W.E. Bigsby comments that folk culture is subject to gradual change, whereas popular culture shows no development, it is marked by lack of a sense of history. Popular culture constitutes those works and events which are meant for mass consumption and for the taste of the majority. It reflects the values and the choices of common mass. Popular culture gives a clear look at the reality of the world today. It is nothing but a product of the mechanized, trivialized, urbanized setting of the modern times. It is a mirror held up to life. It reflects life in its fullness and madness. It takes into account the stream of physical and social mobility. It is closely mingled with the desires of the mass.

Both folk and popular cultures are different from high or elite culture. Elite culture is produced by highly talented individuals following the rules of which their audience is aware, or is supposed to be aware. While popular art asks people to relax, private or elite art asks them to be attentive. Popular art is neither complicated nor serious. Popular culture is the medium for the expression of the attitudes and anxieties of most of the people.

Conclusion

Elite art is a product by some special artists within a particular aesthetic background. It is based on individual tastes and designs. It can also aim at the discovery of new ways and methods. Commenting on the nature of the Elite art, Russel Nye (1970:3)says: "Elite art is produced by known artists within a consciously aesthetic context and by an accepted set of rules. Elite art is exclusive, particular, individualistic, its aim is the discovery of new ways of recording and interpreting experience". On the other hand, popular art is meant for the majority. It is not complicated or difficult for the people. No specialized knowledge is needed for understanding it. It is commonly appreciated by the people. Popular art, as Nye observes, is aimed at the majority. It is neither abstruse, nor complicated, nor profound. To understand and appreciate it, specialized, technical or professional knowledge is not necessary. As popular art is the art of the majority, it becomes an expression

of the attitudes of the society for which it is made. The popular artist must depend upon so many other things for the effectiveness of popular art. Efforts must be made by the popular artist to reach the widest possible audience in the most efficient way. Popular art has to please an audience which is diverse in its styles and manners. The audience must be huge and undefined. On the other hand, the relationship between the elite art and the audience is completely different. Spectators/consumers of elite art possess some common aesthetic and intellectual standards. The popular artist cannot take into account the individual interest, It should aim at the general interest of the people.

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