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### Shifting A Culture

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Communication

### Shifting A Culture

The term popular culture seems very broad. We can name just about any object, action, or event with some kind of cultural significance and call it “pop culture”. The author of *“What is Popular Culture And Why Study It?”* focuses on what she calls “mediated popular culture”, and she defines this as, “the everyday objects, actions, and events we experience through a media channel (e.g., movies, TV programs, songs, comic, strips, advertisements) that may influence us to believe certain things and/or behave certain ways” (Sellnow 3). I think we could easily expand this list today and include things like social media advertising, memes, video blogs, podcasts, live streams, and *tik-toks*. So why is it important that we study popular culture? Well, the author explains this idea that popular culture is full of subtle underlying messages of how we “ought to”, or “ought not to” behave, and what we “ought to”, or “ought not to” believe (Sellnow 4). If we examine these underlying messages, we can, not only expand our awareness of the things around us influencing our beliefs/behaviors, but we can also learn to be more educated consumers of pop culture and industry. The author mentions that popular culture is so pervasive; it’s almost impossible to avoid it in our daily lives (Sellnow 9). She stresses the importance of becoming “educated consumers” in order to obtain the freedom/knowledge to choose what we want to consume. She explains a three-step process for examining a popular culture text to effectively reveal “covert messages”. The first step is to select a text and formulate a research question. So basically, we must have a question of a possible underlying message, or hidden meaning behind a text. The second step is to select a rhetorical perspective. In other words, look at the text through a specific lens or from a certain angle/perspective in relation to persuasion and influence. The third and final step is to “describe, interpret, and evaluate” the text to the best of our ability. (Sellnow 14) A few things we should keep in mind when studying a popular culture text: who or what does this address, and

what does this say about a certain issue or concept. Be able to back up your claim with evidence from the text before making an argument.

We know that “pop culture” can be just about anything, but how can we accurately identify it? In the video: *“Does Popular Culture Need To Be Popular”*, Mike Rugnetta of *PBS Idea Channel* gives his insight on what he considers to be “pop culture”. He starts by dividing the term “popular culture” into several different categories. The first and most established category is the “numerically popular”, or media that large numbers of people have been exposed to one way or another. A big box-office film for example is usually numerically popular. The second category is “critical successes”, or media that becomes popular because it’s talked about or trending. An example of a critical success might be a viral video or a hit single on the radio. Finally, the third category is “pop aesthetic”, or media constructed to seem popular or mimic what is already considered to be “pop culture”, in anticipation of gaining actual popularity. (Rugnetta 1:05) Rugnetta goes on to explain six more concepts associated with popular culture, and they are pretty self-explanatory: achieved popularity (with numbers), not high-culture (not scarce/difficult), post-modern culture (no distinctions between high/low), mass-commercial culture (mass media), folk culture (non-commercial / culture of the people), and hegemonic struggle (culture as industry). (Rugnetta 2:35) Now we know the different types of “pop culture” and how to categorize them, but does “pop culture” have to be popular? The answer isn’t so straightforward. Rugnetta claims that anything that has the capability of becoming “popular” should be considered “pop culture”. (Rugnetta 7:28) This is where we can see some grey areas when we’re examining culture and media. Technically speaking, media that is to be considered “pop culture” must be widespread enough to be numerically popular. Just because something has the potential of becoming popular does not make it popular. Plus, how would you even know if something has the potential of being popular if it hasn’t become popular yet? It would seem there is no clear answer on this, but it does seem like we are now scratching the surface of a concept much bigger than popular culture, and that would be the root of influence and power structures, which I will touch on here in a moment.

But first, let's look at another media platform we must talk about when addressing popular culture and influence is the internet. The majority of media today is distributed through the Internet; and where there is media, there is "pop culture". In the video, *"There's No Such Thing As Offline?!?"*, Mike Rugnetta once again attempts to uncover our ambiguous relationship with this entity we call the Internet. First, he mentions how we like to personify the Internet with some of the terms we associate with it and the way we describe it. (Rugnetta 0:31) It's almost as if the Internet is alive. Like a forest or ocean, it's vast, mysterious, and all encompassing. So, what does it really mean to be online, and do we have to be using the Internet to be online? According to Rugnetta, "when computers were first invented, they were a closed-network of machines that worked together... computers that were connected to the network were considered to be on-line" (Rugnetta 1:05). I think this definition of being "on-line" is still relevant today, except in today's world, the majority of us are connected to this network, whether we want to be or not. In fact, our lives are consumed by it. I would argue that the majority of us are always "on-line", because we are still connected to the network even when we are not using the Internet. Our society operates predominantly online, so it only makes sense that we do too.

According to Rugnetta, "cultural popularity is no longer just a number, it's a process that doesn't have to involve mass culture" (Rugnetta 4:53). In other words, anything can get exposure, and we no longer need the help or funding from giant organizations to release content that is accessible to the population. In the age of the Internet, it has never been easier to gain exposure. This is pretty fascinating. So many more people have access to media channels, and funding or support from large organizations no longer limits popular culture. I want to point out that popularity is not the same thing as popular culture; it's just that popular culture requires popularity. Yes, it's a mouthful, and it's just as confusing as it sounds. An easy way to understand: if it's a form of media and people know about it, it's "pop culture". We should be aware of popular media influencing our culture, so that we can help shift the culture in a positive direction for future generations.

Now I'll share a couple of more personal examples of how popular culture effects our lives and why certain concepts and ideals of living become engrained in us. My goal is to deconstruct these concepts and talk about how they affect me personally, and society as a whole. I decided to analyze a film called, *Miss Representation* by Jennifer Siebel Newsom, which talks about how the mainstream media disseminates, perverts, and objectifies women and girls, which is so wrong on so many different levels. She makes it very transparent in the film how culture treats women and expects them to be a certain way and act certain way, and once you realize this, it's hard to turn a blind eye to these issues. The image that the media portrays of women and girls is highly offensive, damaging, and borderline vulgar. This idealized image must have something to do with the fact that 65% of women suffer from eating disorders and are statistically twice as depressed as the rest of the population. If we look at this issue from a power perspective and ask ourselves why this is happening and why this is still going on, it becomes clear that the system of power (patriarchy & racist/sexist institutions) do not want this to change for one simple reason: Sex sells; and so does violence... But it doesn't have to. We contribute to these misleading standards by supporting these gross celebrities and consuming toxic media and depending on them to fulfill our needs. Just like any type of sustainable practice, supporting organizations whose values align with your own, you can directly contribute to their success and popularity so that eventually they can go mainstream and everyone can join a positive movement. In other words, we need to make it "cool" to look out for one another rather than putting each other down, we need to work together rather than compete with one another, more importantly we need to find organizations that better represent us and support them rather than the ones that clearly aren't doing a good enough job. It sounds awfully political, but that's the reality of the situation. The main problem though, is that we continue to fuel industry by giving them our attention. If we shift our focus elsewhere, these greedy corporations will be forced to change their ideals and get with the program or someone else or some other organization will come in with a different vision and take their place... and maybe that's the solution that we need.

*Tough Guise 2*, the documentary by Jackson Katz, looks at another closely related issue, toxic masculinity, specifically violence and manhood in American culture. This film I could relate to more personally, just because it is highly relevant to the circumstances in which I was raised, and the things that I struggled with and continue to struggle with as a male in modern American society. This film highlights the ideals of American culture when it comes to raising boys/men, and comes to the conclusion that violent masculinity is a “man’s issue”, and is a fundamental problem in our society. The film shows us some mind-blowing statistics of male violence in America. We can see how this idealized image of what it takes to be a man in today’s world has affected everyone and everything negatively. Clearly there’s something wrong with this image. In my experience, being a real man means showing compassion and strength through kindness, and in fact has little or nothing to do with aggression/violence. The film mentions these as “learned behaviors” and I couldn’t agree more. It’s so upsetting for me to hear my peers use harmful and demeaning language to other humans and justify their behavior by saying something like “boys will be boys” or “I can’t help it”, as if their own behavior is beyond their control. Some have even gone as far to say that there is some kind of genetic predisposition towards their behavior. The film even mentions this phenomenon that “men have a natural tendency towards aggression”. This is highly offensive and couldn’t be further from the truth. *Tough Guise 2* hit all these points as well a few more that I didn’t mention, however, these were the ones that stuck out to me. It’s very clear to me that the mainstream media and popular culture are banking on these fabricated “idealized images” in many different ways, all of which are harmful to every human, regardless of race/gender/ethnicity.

Now we know what popular culture is (and what it isn’t), why it’s important to be aware of its presence in our lives, and how to become educated consumers of media. We gained the tools and the knowledge to be able to analyze and interpret a “pop culture” text. We established that basically any content that gets released to the public has the potential of gaining popularity. We shed light on the nature of influence and how certain norms and ideals are built into the very foundation of society. Finally, we figured out that it’s important to understand and be aware of popular culture around us, on

some level, so we can be more educated consumers of media. As educated consumers we have the power to be more selective of the content we are exposed to. If our environment, and the content within shapes our reality, then we can change our reality by changing our environment or “filtering” content. We certainly don’t want someone controlling the content for us, because that would be censorship, and that creates a whole different set of problems...

Ultimately, it is up to us as individuals to filter out certain media content, limiting our exposure to toxic media influence, and just living more balanced lives, where we don’t have to be “online” all the time. Of course, you can’t filter out everything you don’t want to see and we’ve established that we’re never really offline, no matter how hard we try to disconnect, but for now, a good first step is just being aware of these things and how they affect the culture and society. More importantly, it’s essential that we find and become decent role models to look up to rather than filling our news feed with nonsense and misinformation, as well as taking the time to get out in nature or do something that doesn’t require an internet connection every so often to help bring balance to our lives. It’s easy to fit the mold and be like everyone else, but being bold is standing behind your beliefs and not conforming to the “idealized image”, regardless of your exposure to unsolicited content, because popular culture will always be exaggerated, unrealistic, and everchanging, but one thing for sure is that it is not going anywhere. Let’s make being kind and compassionate cool again! This is how we can level up and hopefully shift the culture in a more positive direction for humanity.

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