

MASS CULTURE, POPULAR CULTURE AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

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Summary

Contemporary popular and mass culture has to be differentiated from traditional folk culture. Popular and mass culture by definition has been denigrated as an "impoverished". While manipulation is no doubt a key feature of 'mass culture' one should not overlook that those who are supposed to be manipulated often find very creative ways of using the material offered by 'mass culture'. Just as "folk" culture is not as static as some previous superficial accounts might have suggested, 'mass culture' too, is constantly shifting and changing. Many cultural critics have maintained that on the global plane there is an attempt to create a uniform thinking, a One-Idea-system. When talking about a commercial culture, one needs to remember, that while this culture is no doubt the dominant culture of today, nevertheless it is not equally accessible to all. Therefore, traditional culture is seen by some as a means to shape their own identity and

to resist the pull of a global culture that more and more denies such local identities. The cultural elite, which is marginalized by the culture industry of the metropolis is therefore often outspoken in the condemnation of global culture and calls for a return to old national, continental (“African“, “Latin-American“, “European“ etc.) and religious indigenous cultures. Sport, Consumer goods, Pop music, TV, Talk shows, Soap operas, films can be seen in various way of providing a kind of cultural identity to those who are denied one otherwise. The flowering of cultural freedom, the freedom of diversity, is a feat ever more difficult for poor people and weak countries to achieve, condemned as they are to imitating the lifestyle imposed everywhere nowadays as the only possible way of life.

1. Traditional Folk Culture, popular culture and commercial mass culture

Culture has always been a means to create perceived difference on the basis of inclusion and exclusion: even hunter and gatherer societies which have few signs of social difference have institutions like the men's house (which excludes women and non-initiates). The more complex the social structure of a society the greater the need to define oneself culturally as belonging to various hierarchically structured groups within society. Serious or high culture against mass or popular culture merely translates these differences into modern societies that, while ostensibly democratic and egalitarian, nevertheless are highly hierarchically structured. Listening to certain forms of music or expressing a preference for certain films still identifies one as a member of the cultural elite, the political and economic elite, the rising or descending part of the middle classes, or the working class. Bourdieu has identified such identification marks in French society in every sphere of culture, from the way we eat to the way we furnish our houses and flats, to the sports activities in which we take part or which we attend as spectators.

It is not sufficient to define "popular" as "known by the people, and applauded by them". Contemporary popular and mass culture has to be differentiated from traditional folk culture. Traditional culture survives in relatively few pockets in societies that have not been touched more than superficially by global mass culture, in a perverted form as tourist attraction, and, in a secondary form, as a conscious attempt to resist the attractions of mass culture. Such secondary folk cultures are often regenerated after they had all but succumbed to invaders or to global mass culture as a conscious effort to regain some form of cultural identity. Examples of such "rebirths" are the recovery of the Greek language and culture after the wars against the Turks in the early nineteenth century, the recovery of the Irish language with its concomitant cultural practices after the independence of Ireland from Britain. Currently there are attempts by the Maoris in New Zealand, the Aborigines in Australia and many African cultures to "rebirth" their cultures destroyed by colonialism. Related to these attempts are so-called religious or nationalist fundamentalisms, such as the Muslim and Hindu fundamentalisms. Such revivals often use the desire for a rediscovery of national or religious identity and roots as a political rallying cry.

While folk traditions can gain cultural respectability - e.g. the rediscovery of folk music by Eastern European "classical" composers in the nineteenth century in the context of Pan-Slavonic nationalisms, or the rediscovery of folk songs and fairy tales during

German Romanticism - popular and mass culture by definition has been denigrated as an "impoverished" and "primitive" culture, not worthy of any attention by cultural historians and theoreticians until recently. The typical 'elite' reaction to mass culture is still very much in evidence. Dismissal and contempt are still key features in a landscape where members of the intellectual elite find themselves and their concept of 'high culture' more and more marginalized. In contrast, the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham in the 1970s set about the discovery of popular cultures and youth subcultures. They stressed the inventiveness and subtlety of popular culture. There was also a Neo-Marxist research into the oppositional quality of popular cultural forms and their subversive appropriation of elements of the bourgeois commodified culture, in striking contrast to the very reserved and often hostile stance of official cultural policy towards many forms of Western popular culture in the communist countries. However, the analysis of mass culture in the sixties, mainly by neo-Marxist critics, was at once drawn to what was perceived popular, and highly critical towards what was perceived as manipulative and disempowering in a predominantly American film and pop music culture. Both these attitudes have become even more pronounced as mainly American culture began to dominate the global scene. The question that they attempted to answer was: To what extent is our 'mass culture' one of manipulation and shallowness, or one of choice and contentment?

While manipulation is no doubt a key feature of 'mass culture' one should not overlook that those who are supposed to be manipulated often find very creative ways of using the material offered by 'mass culture' in a way not intended by those who may want to manipulate them. As Bourdieu has shown, building on our knowledge of these social phenomena, it seems both possible and necessary to determine the use to which they are put by groups or individuals. For example, the analysis of the images broadcast by television and of the time spent watching television behavior should be complemented by a study of what the user "does" during this time and with these images. The same goes for the use of urban space, the products purchased in the supermarket, the stories and legends distributed by the newspapers, and so on.

Without wanting to endorse the neo-liberal argument that the inalienable right to choose is always being exercised, or that any satisfaction we derive from popular culture is always complete and without its own contradictions, one should not overlook the fact that the consumers are not only passive dupes of the market. That does not mean that every consumer has the same freedom to deal with the objects offered him by commercial media. The procedures allowing the reuse of products are linked together in a kind of obligatory language, and their functioning is related to social situations and power relationships. Confronted by images on television, the immigrant worker does not have the same critical or creative elbowroom as the average citizen. On the same terrain, his inferior access to information, financial means, and compensations of all kinds elicits an increased deviousness, fantasy, or laughter. Similar strategic deployments, when acting on different relationships of force, do not produce identical effects. Hence the necessity of differentiating both the "actions" or "engagements" (in the military sense) that the system of products effects within the consumer grid, and the various kinds of room to maneuver left for consumers by the situations in which they exercise their "art."

One should also not overlook the fact that the consumers of mass culture often manage to include in the commercial channels cultural artifacts which go against everything commercial culture would want to advertise, because if the merchants of 'mass culture' want to make a profit they have to sell even those products which they probably loathe. Consumers are not helpless manipulees of an all-powerful 'culture industry'. Discrimination and choice, even within the limits of what a culture offers, are often working against the agenda of those who are supposed to manipulate us. After all, we derive satisfaction from participation in popular cultural forms; if we did not we would not participate in them, often against the severe injunctions of educators and elite opinion, and they would not be popular. Nor should we overlook that the popular can be very profound and can contain durable values in a cheap, commercial and ephemeral packaging.

It is true that the immense majority of humanity enjoys only the rights to see, hear and remain silent, at least as far as public utterances are concerned. The right of expression in a public arena is a privilege of the few, and where the majority seems to have a voice on mass media; their utterances are controlled and edited by others. Of course, there is nowhere a single person who has nothing to say. But in this world monopolized by the haves, the have-nots don't have a hope of being heard, yet they are not the least bit mute. Their silence hides much more than echoes of his master's voice, much more than a submissive chorus celebrating the almighty global culture of consumption and violence.

Just as "folk" culture is not as static as some previous superficial accounts might have suggested, 'mass culture' too, is constantly shifting and changing. Not only do fashions change from season to season, popular artists celebrated across the globe appear and disappear; as Barry Richards has shown in *Disciplines of Delight*, on a deeper plane the very structure of 'mass culture' has changed from the nineteenth century to the present in a significant way. In the time of big monolithic factories and mines with mostly unskilled and semiskilled workers, culture revolved around certain forms of release: the pub, the music hall, later the cinema, the football grounds and the seaside resort. The new divisions of labor in a multiplicity of changing service and 'knowledge' industries and the boredom of unemployment have created new forms of pleasure, as have the new technological inventions, such as radio, TV, music and video recordings.

The once rather homogeneous 'youth culture' has split into a variety of niches, and the styles of design, food and clothing have multiplied. Central to this process of multiplication are of course the media, especially the specialist magazines, and where they exist, the narrow casting radio stations and TV channels who deliberately address a local or group specific audience, and who both in their editorial content and in their advertising constantly shape the identity of their audience. The Internet which transcends the local and national media and which easily changes the consumer into a producer has again produced a new phase of popular culture that can be controlled even less than the existing mass media, although various attempts to censor the content of the Internet have already been made. In principle, even if not yet in fact, transactional spaces such as the Internet provide the means for a global agora where humanity can share and transact on its wealth and advance its civilization.

2. Globalization and commercial mass culture

Many cultural critics have maintained that on the global plane there is an attempt to create a uniform thinking, which in its word and concept formation relies heavily on English as global lingua franca, and that produces, what Ramonet calls "la pensée unique", an expression, which is only imprecisely translated as "politically correct thinking". Rather it denotes the homogenized thinking of one standardizing idea, a One-Idea-system. Alain Minc, who introduced the term information society to the western discourse in the late 1970s, formulates the One Idea as: "Capitalism cannot break down, it is the natural state of society. Democracy is not the natural state of society. The market is." Even taking into account the exceptions - and fortunately there are exceptions, and not so few - this giant machinery tends to offer us thousands of ways of choosing between the same and the same. Endlessly repeated through the mass media, from the Wall Street Journal to CNN, the One Idea System brushes away social concerns as sentimental or even counter productive. Naturalized as "realism" or "pragmatism" the system has effectively insulated itself against any critique and has achieved a hegemonic status, accepted by politicians of all couleur.

The inclusion of culture into the globalizing economy leads to the creation of a global culture of commodified consumerism, dominated by American multinational media conglomerates. Technological diversity is said to be democratic diversity. It is true that technology places images, words and music within the reach of many more than ever before in the history of humanity. But such apparent diversity is merely an appearance without any substance, when private monopolies end up imposing a one-image, one-word, one-tune dictatorship on the planet. The result is a homogenization and Americanization of previously distinct cultures. This makes one ponder Arnold Toynbee's statement in *A Study of History* that Civilizations in decline are consistently characterized by a tendency toward standardization and uniformity. Conversely, during the growth stage of civilization, the tendency is toward differentiation and diversity. The political crisis is visible from the encroachment of the nation-state by global financial markets, whose power can no longer be controlled through the institutions of the liberal democracy, and free trade agreements which effectively limited the state's power to conduct an independent economic and social policy, to the uniformity of global culture where the cultural institutions of individual nations or groups can no longer compete with the resources of global media conglomerates. More and more vital decisions are made entirely outside the influence of democratic institutions. In effect, decision-making has been privatized. The economic, political and cultural crisis are deeply related, and because misery is an insult to human rights, such large scale shredding of the social fabric destroys a certain conception of the republic itself.

In his acceptance speech upon receiving the 1999 Lannan Prize for Cultural Freedom, Eduardo Galeano said: "This world, our world at the end of the century, our world at the end of the millennium, is blind to itself, unable to take in the horror of the mutilations it suffers or the marvel of the splendors it conceals, filled with colors we are not allowed to see and with voices we are not allowed to hear. In the midst of this era of mandatory globalization, which is like an immense factory pumping out cultural clones or clowns for the market circus, these colors and voices keep alive powerful evidence that the best of the world lies in the quantity of worlds the world contains."

While the nation states from the late middle-ages to the twentieth century attempted to create a national identity, largely based on a common language, but subordinating and often obliterating regional differences in language and culture and oppressing minorities who clung to their culture and language, globalism, despite the predominance of English as a lingua franca, does not set out to destroy minor languages (although in effect it often does). Its attempted uniformity of thought replaces the earlier attempts of the nation states to create a uniform national language and culture. While the nation state according to Herder's ideas had to insist on shaping a homogeneous language and culture in order to create that unit, within which the national market could function, and thus had to engage in an aggressive language politics with regard to its minorities, the global market can afford language and cultural enclaves, as long as the key ideas of globalization are universally translatable into every language.

There is world-wide a sizeable group of people who have adapted to the new global situation and who move freely in the areas that are within the range of this commercial global culture. The idea of a new form of cosmopolitanism is attracting increasing interest among those who move freely from country to country. For them the hope is that cosmopolitan groups will be in the forefront of establishing values, institutions and lifestyles that are less directly embedded within nation-state societies.

The new cosmopolitan political ideal, first mooted in the European enlightenment, entails some notion of the global city (as opposed to the global village). This implies some form of world-state, or federation of states, which would involve the development of cosmopolitan or supranational law and forms of citizenship and governance, in line with the development of global markets. These mobile elites who enjoy the freedom of physical movement and communication, stand in stark contrast to those who are confined to place, whose fate is to remain located. This elite is confronted by those excluded that engage in some form of anti-globalizing identity politics, insisting on their cultural traditions. For them the cosmopolitan is a figure to be reviled as it has become associated with the unwillingness of upper and middle class groups to sustain a sense of responsibility towards the growing numbers of those excluded from the benefits of this global culture. If global democratization is to move forward it must not merely be the project of a Western center, but become gradually assembled from a range of cross-cultural polylogues.

2.1 The commercial culture of the metropolis

When talking about a commercial culture, one needs to remember, that while this culture is no doubt the dominant culture of today, nevertheless it is not equally accessible to all. Eighty-six percent of the world's goods go to the top twenty percent of the world population, the bottom fifth get one percent.

In the light of these well-known figures the apologists for globalization need to rethink their contention that open borders, reduced tariffs, and forced trade on their own benefit the poorest six billion people in the world. Globalization does, however, create the concentrations of capital seen in northern financial and industrial centers. Since the people promoting globalized free trade policies live in those cities, it is natural that they should be biased.

Already, the world's top 200 companies have twice the assets of 80 percent of the world's people.

And this polarization and concentration of wealth is increasing. Global corporations represent a new empire whether they are aware of it or not. With massive amounts of capital at their disposal, any of which can be used to influence politicians and the public as and when deemed necessary, they threaten and diminish all democratic institutions. Corporate free market policies subvert culture and community, and are thus seen by many as a true tyranny. As Stewart Brand points out, business unchecked becomes crime.

The commercial culture of post modernity is a culture of leisure (and this despite the fact that more and more people seem to work longer and longer hours not only in the underdeveloped and emerging countries, but astonishingly in the countries with the most advanced and automated industries). At the basis of this paradox seems to be that the accumulation of wealth for its own sake is the predominant cultural ideal of our times and seems to be the driving force in the recent attempts to redefine public wealth. Now, it has long been believed that leisure, rather than work, is the basis of 'culture'. By culture we mean primarily the additional artistic and educational achievements of humans as a result of their conscious effort to embellish their lives with art, or understand their world through study. The achievements of the ancient Greeks for example could possibly be attributed to their ability not only to avoid trivial pursuits, but also to organize their public resources so they don't have to work hard for the sake of working alone. Of course they, like many other 'high cultures' until the middle of the nineteenth century, had slaves. But one should think that the need for slaves to generate leisure has been largely, if not wholly, obviated by automation. Technology seems capable of taking over most, if not all, of the trivial and 'back breaking' human jobs and science can well maintain a sustainable future for all on this planet. But so far the majority of the earth's population has not come to profit in greater leisure from this capability of technology.

People in ancient Greece did not consider wealth anything to be proud of, but merely to be expended for the benefit of the common good, which was usually coextensive with one's city state (polis). They considered humans who sought wealth or power for their own sake, as potential tyrants, to be shunned, stamped out, or hated, as the occasion may allow. In fact, this is one of the most salient points that distinguished the Greeks from the Persians. To the Greeks, the Persian love for luxury had a feeling of decadence and superficiality about it. Thus while the Greeks measured their worth primarily through their achievements, including their artistic and intellectual contributions, the Persians were very proud of their conquests.

Cities have long been the sites for markets and the mixing of people, commodities, ideas and cultures. They have been the homes of a wide range of intellectual and artistic, social and cultural movements and institutions. If we compare our leisure activities to those of previous cultures, one of the things that strike one, is the way other cultures have structured the space in which they live. The observer who walks through Houston in Texas, which is not made for walking but for driving, and compares it to a medieval city like Regensburg or Paris or an ancient city like Athens will notice that there is an

entirely different attitude to the placement and use of public space. The Greek city-states for example were literally built to educate. Complete with public theatre, stadium, parks, athletic centers, public baths, fountains, and statues, and combination marketplace-debate arena - the agora.

There is strong historical evidence that all kinds of political, oratorical, and philosophical debates took place in the agora. In fact, a whole school of philosophy known as "stoicism" which later greatly influenced Roman law and institutions, originated inside just such an agora. By building their cities so beautifully and well endowed with public facilities, and making public functions free for all, they made it easier for everyone to live happily, if not 'aristocratically', with only a meager source of income.

The 'public spaces' today are really 'private', like the shopping mall and the entertainment palaces. To use them one needs money. But more: they are not really places where people congregate to be 'together'. Even the cinema isolates the individual viewers in the darkness of their privacy. This is even more pronounced in the contemporary forms of entertainment, TV and the Internet. The isolated individual thus faces the multitude of stimuli alone, without the critical support of a public which reinforces or diminishes his or her own reaction to the stimuli, and which allows a 'critical discussion' - even if this discussion consists only of books to indicate a generally held dissent. The isolated recipient of messages and cultural artifacts is bombarded by a confusing variety of material, yet isolated from any form of debate that would make sense of these materials. The few events where masses still congregate - such as sporting events and pop-music concerts do not essentially change this.

As electronic systems are substituted, at all points of the social field, for face-to-face communication situations, individuals experience and are subject to new linguistic experiences. The relation of discourse to practice is profoundly changed. One example of this is TV advertising, which in many cases attempts to co-ordinate the consumption of commodities with sexual fantasies. Businesses need to grow more quickly than ever before. They are punished, pummeled and bankrupted if they do not. With world-wide capital mobility, companies and investments are rewarded or penalized instantly by a network of technocrats and money managers who move \$2 trillion dollars a day seeking the highest return on capital. The Internet, greed, global communications, and high-speed transportation are all making businesses move faster than before.

The unrelenting stimulation of the consumer's appetite by new commodities has a profound impact on the modern psyche. By requiring us continually to move to something new, it destroys any basis for stable relationships. Of course, businesses are quick, welcome innovation in general, and have a bias for change. Stylistic and technological innovation command attention and evokes desire in the consumer. Fashion is the hunger for or addiction to new signs, although very often it merely recalculates old signs, revising meanings and altering images. The new can and often is, of course, also perceived as alien and cold, and this is where the phenomenon of branding comes in: in the constantly changing fashions it provides for some sense of stability and sameness. Wherever advertising appeals to the 'classic' qualities of an object, it appeals to this regressive sense of stability.

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Biographical Sketch

Peter Horn studied German and English at the University of the Witwatersrand. In 1971 he graduated Ph.D. from the University of the Witwatersrand with a thesis on "Rhythm and structure in the poetry of Paul Celan", and was offered the chair of German at the University of Cape Town in 1974. From 1987 to 1990 he was Dean of the Faculty of Arts, and from 1993-1994 Acting Deputy Vice-Chancellor of the University. He was president South African Association of German Studies (1989-1997), president of the Institute for Research into Austrian and International Literary Processes (Vienna) (2001-), on the executive committee of the Elias-Canetti-Gesellschaft, the National Executive of the Congress of South African Writers (COSAW) (1991 - 1992), the National Executive of the South African Writers' Association. Besides he was Honorary Vice President of the National Union of South African Students (1977-1981), Trustee of the South African Prisoners' Educational Trust Fund (1980-1985), and a member of the Interim Committee of the Unemployed Workers' Movement (1984/5). In 1974 he received the Pringle Prize of the South African English Academy for an essay to the concrete poetry, in 1992 he received the Noma Award for Publishing in Africa (Honourable Mention for Poems 1964-1989), and in 1993 the Alex La Guma/Bessie Head Award and in 2000 the Herman Charles Bosman Prize for the short story collection *My Voice is under Control now*. In 1994 the University of Cape Town granted him a Honorary Fellowship for life. Two of his volumes of poetry and numerous other publications by him were banned for possession during the Apartheid regime. His poems are anthologised in most major anthologies of South African poetry, and more than 100 have been published in journals. He has published numerous contributions to academic books, learned journals, and reviews and review articles.