

POPULAR CULTURE

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What does the 'popular' in popular culture stand for? If I am correct, it always stood for something oppositional, a counter-culture opposing the culture of the oppressors, of the ruling elites. 'The people' as historical agent with their own culture, as British marxists like E.P. Thompson and Raymond Williams would have it in their histories from below. Resistance, somehow, seems to be the catch-word in many studies of 'popular culture' by historians and anthropologists over the last few decades. Resistance, agency and to use a Gramsci-derived term, subalternity. The idea was that by giving attention to popular culture one might escape from elite representations of cultural reality, yes from hegemony itself. This idea, obviously, makes not only 'the people' heroes of an unwritten history of popular culture, but makes also academic research into something heroic: giving 'the people' their due by representing the hitherto 'unrepresented'.

A fair amount of these ideas of the radical 1960s should by now be obsolete, but I am afraid they are not. If 'popular' indeed stands in opposition to 'elitist' we had better get rid of the term altogether. Most societies I have some faint knowledge of are much too complex to make those distinctions. The old term 'popular masses' is in my view meaningless unless it includes everyone. Working class culture, a much more useful term, may be available in E.P. Thompson's England, but, if it at all exist in Holland, India or the USA (the three societies I am most familiar with) not in the way described by Thompson. And who are these elites? Middle-class bourgeois or aristocratic landowners or the military establishment or, to use Hamza Alavi's term, the "salariat", office-holders? I would suggest that we should think beyond these singularities of class and be more open to a multiplicity of subject positions. The first thing to do is to get rid of the opposition 'popular-elite' altogether and perhaps replace it with another opposition, namely 'popular-impopular' which would simply draw attention to processes of expansion and marginalization in the study of cultural forms. Video-games have definitely become very popular and may have pushed aside other forms of teenage entertainment.

In popular culture studies there is often, as Jacques Derrida calls it, a nostalgia of origins, of pure presence. Direct speech or theatrical performance "by the people themselves" is often privileged above written or cinematic representation. The expansion of writing and other media are thus as invasions which disrupt the unmediated immediacy of authentic speech. As Derrida has pointed out in his comments on Levi-Strauss's structural anthropology, all this is neither new nor radical, since Western philosophy has always seen speech as prior to writing and thus closer to reality. Similarly, writing has been portrayed as a derivative, phonetic transcription of speech. Again, I would suggest, that we had better get rid of these Rousseau-derived desires of authenticity and originary purity, since they prevent us from taking up what I consider to be the greatest challenge in contemporary cultural studies -popular and unpopular, namely the globalization of mass culture.

Cultural studies today cannot do without a comparative understanding of the

reception and transformation of 'cosmopolitan' cultural forms or, to put it crudely, cultural globalization. These cultural forms belong to a momentous flow of 'Western', though also increasingly globally inflected, models and images of personal identity, domesticity, interpersonal relations, and social consumption.¹ An up-to-date scholarly study of these global flows needs to distance itself from two unwarranted assumptions current in the literature. For one, it needs to replace the emphasis on passive reception with an emphasis on active, culturally specific, and contextually variable, transformation. Secondly, and connected to this, research needs to distance itself from the superficial view that global flows spell a homogenization of 'world culture'.² These generalizations are unconvincing on two counts at least. They continue to enshrine simplistic divisions between 'the West' and 'the rest', and they feed from unwarranted assumptions about cultural purity and authenticity. One may add that they also over-emphasize, and indeed pre-judge, the ideological distinction between 'popular culture' and 'elite' pursuits such as art and literature.

These assumptions need to be replaced with an approach, comparative and culturally specific in method, that draws upon advances in interpretive research and discourse analysis. Such an approach examines not global flows as such, but the practices through which they are represented. Representational practices are part of cultural and historical contexts which have to be understood. They do not arise from some given cultural repertoire for the interpretation of events, but they are contests for the definition of contemporary reality, and hence for control over cultural resources.³

¹ Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy", Public Culture, 2, 2, 1990, 1-25. See also in general the issues of the journal Public Culture, founded by Carol A. Breckenridge and Arjun Appadurai

² Cees Hamelink, Cultural Autonomy in Global Communications. New York, (Longman), 183.

³ See Peter van der Veer, Religious Nationalism. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.