

Editorial: What is Popular Culture?

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After decades (or maybe centuries) of asking this bedeviling question, scholars around the world still agonize over how to express popular culture. Is it as water is to the fish, as our intellectual forefather Ray B. Browne concluded, or is it simply all that is not elite or high culture? Moving from the tactical to the strategic or meta-level, one might wonder if popular culture is even a thing. Perhaps it is more like the air or oxygen than water or maybe the atmosphere itself, something we know exists but cannot visibly see or easily explain. Maybe it is more like the sun, always there, essential to life, yet a thing we know relatively little about, particularly given its centrality to our very existence.

Regardless of one's specific definition, it is impossible to deny the ubiquity of popular culture in contemporary society. It is so rampant that it could be viewed as a kind of common or global language that links people across geographic, class, race, gender, and economic lines, though these factors certainly play a critical role in how one speaks or interacts with popular culture. The notion of standing around a water cooler at work and discussing last night's new television series or film debut is important in how culture breaks barriers—anyone can participate. This idea remains central even as the water cooler itself rarely exists in today's workplace and has more or less become a part of pop culture lore.

My inclination is to view popular culture as the connections that form between individuals and objects. It is one's engaging with a popular culture entity that then produces a feeling in the person that takes culture to an emotional level. I suggest that it is this instinctual link to culture that results in the chemical reaction that bursts in one's brain when encountering popular culture items. That rush can *feel* like or actually be chemistry, hatred, attraction, antipathy, or love.

Whether it is a favorite novel, particular film, or piece of music, we are chemically attuned to popular culture. Observer's claim that the brain is "hard-wired" to comprehend many things, popular culture is one of the most critical. In examining literature, for example, scholar Richard M. Dorson explains:

A tale is not a dictated text with interlinear translation, but a living recitation delivered to a responsive audience for such cultural purposes as reinforcement of custom and taboo, release of aggressions through fantasy, pedagogical explanations of the natural world, and applications of pressures for conventional behavior. (21)

Again, on an instinctual level then, popular culture is the manifestation of our physical desire for culture. I hazard this is why a baby will dance and sway to music long before she realizes what music actually is and why people are attracted to certain actors, narratives, and situations.

For additional clues, we might journey back in time, say more than 10,000 years, to examine what popular culture might have looked like then. In the era of foragers, which historian David Christian explains is “the first and by far the longest era of human history,” early humans trekked across Africa and eventually into other areas, as far away as Siberia and Australia (*Fleeting* 1). Though details remain scant, according to Christian, the cave paintings found in Spain and France reveal artistic development. He explains that these small groups, occasionally bumping into one another, slowly evolved into networks, including marriage between groups, and most likely the ability to convey stories and culturally-shared activities, such as dancing (*Fleeting* 3, 10). What constituted “popular” at this time and for tens of thousands of years may have meant merely a handful of people or small groups that occasionally intermingled. During nomadic times, these groups may have ranged from 25 to 50 people and larger communities of around 500.

The more important aspect, however, is that these early humans experienced some kind of emotion, feeling, or information-sharing based on cultural interaction. At the same time, foraging communities developed new technologies and innovations, such as better hunting weapons and clothing. Just as in the last several hundred years the evolution of technology spurred a parallel outpouring of popular culture, one can imagine the more sophisticated and decorated clothing and other forms of artistry symbolizing a burgeoning growth in popular culture during that epoch.

Another idea to consider is that these lean, nomadic muscle machines with big brains for engines propelling the whole enterprise physically and emotionally must have had some of what we call today, “down time.” They had to have space to let their bodies and developing brains rest. In studying recent nomadic societies

and some ancient civilizations, researchers can hypothesize that these early humans had feelings of spirituality, which scholar Fred Spier calls “religious needs” (136). Increased brain power would have led to increased complexity in thinking about self, society, and civilization, even if on a limited scale.

As the brain continued evolving, from about 200,000 years ago to 35,000 years ago, humans became more complex thinkers, explains historian Cynthia Stokes Brown, “producing cave paintings, carvings, figurines, grave goods, [and] ornamentation” (57). From J. R. McNeill and other world historians, we learn that the arrival of agrarian society, about 12,000 to 4,000 years ago created a cultural springboard, from political systems, religions and rituals, and other forms of “human cultural diversity.” Later, McNeill informs us, the “process of cultural diversification, reversed itself” (108). Homogeneity ruled as those with power took over and consolidated. For example, religions grew, the number of individual languages dropped, and culture centralized.

Ray Browne once attempted to encapsulate popular culture, broadly stating, “It is the everyday world around us: the mass media, entertainments, diversions, heroes, icons, rituals, psychology, religion—our total life picture” (75). In pondering this definition and contemplating its link back to the earliest humans and beginnings of popular culture, I see a connection between today’s iconic figures like George Clooney, Brad Pitt, or Angelina Jolie, and the early figurines, paintings, and tools that date back about 100,000 years ago.

Imagine, a leap back in time to about 40,000 to 35,000 years ago, when the last Ice Age began to blanket most of the earth in snow and cold. For the next 15,000 years, early humans grappled for survival. Most people did not live through the era, but thankfully for us, enough did to carry on the human race. Astonishingly, despite this ongoing battle for survival, what remains from the time frame is an artistic flourishing that staggers modern researchers. From human figurines found across Europe and Russia to cave paintings throughout Europe and Africa, one must surmise that our ancestors used art to cope with the changing circumstances and stresses of life in such a severe environment (Matthews and Mallam). Christian explains, “In harsh environments, knowledge is as crucial as tools...knowledge was highly valued, and carefully codified and stored in stories, rituals, songs, paintings, and dances” (*Maps* 197).

Scholars Rob DeSalle and Ian Tattersall point to artworks found in the Vogelherd cave in southern Germany that contained animal figurines of a horse, mammoth, and lion. Although these ancient trinkets are more than 30,000-years-

old, they are not straightforward renditions of the animals. The horse, for example, DeSalle and Tattersall report, “is a perfect evocation of the abstract essence of all horses: symbolic in every sense of the term” (196).

Although early artwork and animal figurines demonstrate early humankind’s symbolic reasoning, the link between their world and ours grows closer when examining the Venus figures. These include the Venus of Willendorf, one of the earliest images of the human body made by humans, which archaeologist Josef Szombathy discovered on the banks of the Danube River in Austria in 1908. The Venus of Willendorf is about four and a half inches tall and dates back about 22,000 to 24,000 years ago. The figurine and others similar to it are notable for having exaggerated body female body parts, including enlarged breasts and hips (Matthews and Mallam).

Since few actual women probably looked like the Venus of Willendorf in a nomadic period of foraging and other Venus statuettes have similar body types, some researchers conclude that the figurine is of an idol or idealized female. Here the comparison with Pitt comes full circle, since Pitt himself is now more photographic or filmic image than real human being and certainly idolized on a number of levels. In certain films, Pitt has exaggerated male features designed to accentuate his star quality, from the oversized physique of *Troy* to the sleek extreme of *Fight Club*.

Another way to view the Venus of Willendorf/Brad Pitt connection is as cultural constructs. In other words, people within the culture are using ideal images as representations of adulation. We do not know for sure why specific characteristics of the Willendorf statuette are exaggerated or even the rationale for the figurine, but considering the craftsmanship it took to sculpt it, the sculpture possessed meaning. Conversely, we may think we understand why Pitt is super buff or beefed up for certain roles or even why he is presented as the ideal male, but I think this points to the foundational nature of culture. Perhaps attempting to link contemporary definitions of popular culture with its origins may someday lead us to the discovery of a culture gene, if not in fact, then metaphorically, which leads us deeper into the connection between human nature and popular culture.

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