

On Time and Popular Culture

CARRIELYNN D. REINHARD

Time is an interesting phenomenon. It is both an objective aspect of the nature of our universe and a subjective experience of our universe. We humans shape time through different forms of measurement, bending the rotations of our planet to our social, cultural, political, and economic needs. We speak equally about the past and the future as if they are concrete entities that continue to exist in our universe and shape our lives, while simultaneously referring to something called “the present” — although by the time we have labeled it as such, it has already become the past. We quip idioms like “time changes everything,” “time heals all wounds,” or “time flies by” that anthropomorphically ascribe agency to time while also lamenting the dearth of time we have in our daily lives and the entirety of our lifespans. Quixotically, time exists both in abundance and in scarcity, with an ambling gait and far too much rapidity, in ebbs and flows yet with regular circularity that makes people’s heads spin while also forgetting that what has happened before is likely to happen again.

Time is both subjective and objective. Similarly, popular culture exists in this dual state and in the tension between the states. We construct popular culture by, literally, determining what texts and practices are popular, for anything from a short window of time — putting the “pop” in “pop culture” — to spanning eons and generations and moving from niche cult to globalized culture. Because we construct it, popular culture is inherently subjective, based entirely on preferences and tastes and thus able to exist in plurality with many others. Yet popular culture also objectively exists outside of us, in the material texts and ideological practices that constitute it, allow it to transverse space and time, and impact individuals and communities. And in the tension between the purely subjective and purely objective lies all the “stuff,” both material and ideological, of popular culture studies.

All things change, but the more things change, the more they stay the same? The articles collected in this issue demonstrate how popular culture both changes, and does not change, across time. In this collection, contributors consider how ideas about feminism and gender, race and ethnicity, sexuality and intersectionality have all shifted in some way, perhaps challenging our past conceptions about societies, cultures, theories, and popular culture studies itself. Research considers the popular

The Popular Culture Studies Journal, Vol. 8, No. 1
Copyright © 2020

culture of the 1950s, the 1970s, the 1960s, the 2000s, and today. Analyses of older media and newer media exist in this collection, providing different, yet similar, perspectives on celebrity, genre, fandom, and education. The fantasies of horror and superheroes compare to the realities of war and imprisonment to show just how much our world has progressed, and how much remains to be done.

In looking at popular cultures across time, we can learn more about our current state, and perhaps better understand our connections to past states. We can both see the patterns that have repeated across time and see the past in light of how we see ourselves today. The past is not some foreign world wherein the inhabitants act in ways so counter to our own. The past was us. We are their future. We will be the future's past. We are not wholly unique entities, but manifestations of complex networks, more alike than different, and more complex than we perhaps like to think. Understanding popular culture across time can better help us understand these connections and complexities, and perhaps provide new insights to help those who follow us, to both learn from our mistakes and build on what we have constructed.