

Introduction: Popular Culture as Dialogue

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On November 4th, 2020, the day after the 2020 United States Presidential election, we had our first Popular Culture Dialogue on the relationship between popular culture and democracy: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3NbjbZeWLPQ&t>. We did not livestream the dialogue, so the format was slightly different from those that are seen live, and our discussion came out later than that fraught morning. As the next days, weeks, months, and, unfortunately, years unfolded, the United States democracy became even more tenuous. Perhaps the conversation I, Megan Condis, Julia Largent, Melanie Schiller, Laura Alvarez Trigo, and Christopher Zysik had on that morning has become more important for popular culture scholars to visit. With so many politicians and governments legislating against transpeople, drag performers, and the LGBTQIA+ community, the relationship between popular culture and democracy requires increasingly critical scrutiny.

On April 15th, 2023, “Tax Day” in the United States, I asked our Twitter followers: what should be the role/relationship/function of popular culture to a successful democracy?

Some responses focused on the obviousness of the connection, seeing the two as intertwined. Dr. S. A. Applin (@AnthroPunk) said: “Consider that to some, a “successful democracy” *is* popular culture...” To add to this sentiment, Ryan Pumroy (@RyanPumroy) said: “Popular culture = participation in politics. The line is so blurred that one can't (or at least shouldn't) be considered without the other.” Indeed, in a representative democratic governance, the public and the popular as seemingly the same. Elections and legislature are decided upon majority or popular vote, and the public’s affectations towards politicians and issues likely have as much – if not more – impact on their decisions as any logical argument and credible evidence.

While representative democracies may be more-or-less legitimate forms of governance at this point of the 21st century, the serious value of popular culture remains challenged. Perhaps because popular culture appears ephemeral and whimsical, aligned more with people’s emotional than rational needs. Or perhaps it is in popular culture that the true sentiments and values of the public are openly displayed. xMRNUTTYx (@xdanharmonx) said: “Pop culture exposes people to

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things they otherwise wouldn't be confronted with. It's why representation scares reactionaries: because their worldview requires othering and that doesn't work when exposure shows humanity rather than propaganda." What better way to delegitimize a popular sentiment and political impetus than to mock the very cultural forms that act as its incubator? Indeed, popular culture's true power may be in its use as an agora for public discourse. Tony Thorne (@tonythorne007) said: "Provide a multimodal heteroglossic response to superdiversity. (And thereby ensure dissent, critique, disruption of dominant discourses.)" How can a civilization prosper without such safe spaces for contentious conversations?

Now, looking at the particular American context for this relationship perhaps illuminates the problems of/for popular culture. Dr. Peter Cullen Bryan (@pfxbryan) said: "Traditionally, popular culture has served to reinforce national connections and democratic values, at least in America, though more recently has become a site for ongoing political conflict over shared cultural values (Ghostbusters 2016, The Last Jedi, Captain Marvel)." Popular culture connects people's individual beliefs and feelings to larger sociocultural ideologies and movements through how it reflects, creates, and reinforces both. Such ideological work has material impacts, whether through political policy or economic processes. Conflict has been, and perhaps should be, a part of both, as conflict begets change. But only when such conflict is combined with honest reflection and respectful communication to move beyond no-logue and monologue to dialogue.

When popular culture does not serve dialogue, and instead seeks to insulate people from conflict and thus change, then the relationship becomes toxic. Pop Culture & Theology (@PopAndTheology) said: "I wonder if this conversation would be complete without a discussion of how pop culture can undermine democratic participation (a la Horkheimer and Adorno's Culture Industry)." Since anything can become popular given the right circumstances, popular culture can as easily support authoritarianism as democracy. Indeed, the continued discourse of delegitimization and disempowerment around popular culture studies – and its related discourses such as fan studies, humanities, diversity and equity programs, and so forth – represent the attempt to remove people's agency. The ridiculing of the embodied and everyday lives of millions serves to maintain power among those with political and/or religious traditions as their bulwark. As Stasia (@svttxetc) said: "If we get rid of labelism and stop assuming pop culture is something to be ashamed of, it would be easier to undermine elitist discourse in politics as well."

Popular cultures circulate messages on appropriateness, success, morals, values, ethics, hopes, dreams, fears. In short, reality(s) is constructed through popular culture. Authoritarian regimes, from the German Nazis to the American Christo-fascists, seek to control those realities and, by extension, the public's discourses of and motivation to political activity. Across the United States, attempts to shut down drag shows – a form of popular culture – is not simply to “protect children” as their messaging would suggest. It is to control who produces reality through popular culture. American Christo-fascists fight against multiculturalism and pluralism that dismantle their traditional bulwarks and power. They prefer people live in anger and fear of the present, not in hopes and dreams for a better future. Erika (@LaLunding) said: “Consider the representation of guns, weapons & violence in popular culture. Do we really need so much of it? And a lot less misogyny, please. It does matter.” Violence makes us afraid of the people around us. Such fear changes our discourses of and motivation to political activity.

What should be the role/relationship/function of popular culture to a successful democracy?

It should not be to shut down difference of ideas and living. Even if that means conflict occurs. It should be to provide a space within realities are explored so that people can see the possibilities and work among themselves to produce the one they prefer. But if all possibilities are not presented, this process cannot function. If the public cannot and do not consider all these possibilities, then they do a disservice to themselves, their ancestors, and their descendants. The struggles of those who came before us cannot be ignored, and the struggles we face cannot be passed along. Popular culture should be a place of dialogue, wherein we learn from one another how to see ourselves and each other. Only in doing so can we honor those who came before, act justly towards those around us, and prepare the world for those yet to come.