

## Popular Media and Popular Culture

The influence of popular media on culture in North America is a very complex question that has been studied for many years, without providing any definitive answers to the question, what is the extent of this influence? Everyone agrees there is some influence, but no one agrees on how such influence operates and its extent. If the relationship between televised images and behaviour were direct, then we could expect that everyone or most people would adopt the fashions and behaviours portrayed, but they do not. Young people, teenagers in particular, seem particularly susceptible to certain influences (for example, clothing fashions and linguistic trends) but not to others. This last point is particularly important because critics of television always invoke a model of degeneration, of corruption, as if television could only influence people negatively. However, if it has any power to influence, it could in theory influence people positively, for example, inducing them to like classical music and "high" art and drama instead of vulgar and low forms. Of course, this directionality of television –always bringing people down to a lowest common denominator rather than up to "higher" sentiments – could very well be that only low images are portrayed as a response to market demand. In fact, in the beginning of the television era in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the owners of the first television stations and networks were determined to present "high" forms of entertainment only – dramas and not comedies, ballet and not variety, classical music and not popular rock and roll. Ratings were low, leading to the conclusion that people wanted low forms of entertainment – comedies and light variety instead of high art. If that is the case, then television's influence is relatively limited in that it is merely supplying a product whose demand originates elsewhere – people already had and have low tastes and these must come from other sources rather than television itself.

However, the real story of television and popular culture is very complex and has not been told because ideological concerns have made it almost impossible to tell the true story of how people after the second World War transformed culture by their actions and choices. These effects have rarely been analysed because researchers have all taken a critical position in regards to popular media and culture and so chose, unconsciously or not, to ignore the effects of the mass culture as manifested as individual choices made by millions of people.

The war had been preceded by the Great Depression. Millions of people were without work. Government investment policies and the war, with government investment in heavy industries, and infrastructure laid the basis for future prosperity. The war meant sacrifice. After the war, millions of people were ready to start reaping the benefits of the investments and sacrifices they had made for the previous twenty years. People started buying. For the first time, it was possible to produce consumer goods in massive quantities, and possible to find a market for these consumer goods, especially cars and houses. North America developed a middle class for the first time in its history, and a true middle class for the first time in the history of the world. The majority of people in a society could look forward to lives of relative ease and dignity. The key was consuming, buying less expensive versions of things which had once been limited to the rich.

This created new styles and a whole class of new products for the middle classes. For the first time, popular items –furniture, cars, homes, appliances – were not poor imitations of what was found in rich homes. They were designed and built with the middle class in mind. Society was truly transformed, and the key was ongoing consumption, which gave the middle classes the comforting illusion that they had arrived, that they were a class unto themselves, that they mattered, that, indeed, they and their values were the backbone of society. They were, after all, in the majority by the end of the 1950s.

I think television and popular imagery can be seen in this light. Just as the middle class demanded and consumed items that were designed for them – affordable yet distinctive and not an imitation of what the rich elites consumed – they demanded their own culture as well. This culture had to be consumable, like the goods they bought to define their new status. And especially it had to be designed and aimed at them as a class. They rejected cultural representations that seemed to be imitations of the culture of the elites, the high culture of museums, dramas, ballet, classical music and the like. It is no accident that rock and roll music, for example, which had been around in one form or another for decades in the form of popular black music, became the music of the White middle classes in this period because it is sufficiently low and distant from any musical forms that the rich elites consumed. Rock and roll became the music of the people.

The debate on television's alleged influence on popular culture is not new. It was in the 1950s

that a noted critic named Gleason (I think) called television "the great wasteland". It was noted in the 1960s that television played a key role in sensitising people to the horrors of the Vietnam war since for the first time independent journalists could transmit visual images at great speeds that could bypass military censorship. Through television, war became something that people could watch every night, almost live and in direct. Still, popular television shows at the time were still tame. They had watered-down hippies, watered-down popular trends. In brief, television was not leading the way in defining popular culture, it was supplying images that reflected trends that were developed elsewhere. Only in terms of news did television have any effect on popular consciousness. By this time, the idea of the middle class and middle class culture was solidly rooted, and that is why television images were so tame – shows had to be geared to the middle class, and these shows had to be consumable, like middle class cars and furniture – mass produced, comfortable, affordable. In terms of culture, "affordable" meant that everyone could consume them, which meant that the content could never offend anyone. In this sense, that is why these shows seem so surreal – they cannot refer to any lived one segment of the population's lived reality if they must appeal to many people in different areas of life. Their unreal images are in this sense mythic projections not of people's psychic or existential needs but a reaffirmation of the privileged position of the middle class vis a vis other classes. And these shows and images had to be consumed like middle class goods – not built to last but built to satisfy an immediate need to surround oneself with markers of this new status.

It was only in the 1980s when MTV came on line (1981, I think) that serious questions were posed about television's influence on popular culture. That is because for the first time a show was not aimed at the middle class as such but at a segment of the middle class, the young who were still living at home and were not financially independent.

Such shows had always existed but in a different form, as children's programming, for example. What made MTV different from other specialised niche programming was the cynicism, irony and overt anti-consumerism it portrayed. All three of these characteristics are essentially manifestations of the same phenomenon, that youth culture was supposed to reject the consumerism of middle class parents of the previous generation, those who had transformed the world and themselves by buying and consuming a new class of consumer goods that were semi-

durable (the major one was cars, of course). Children still consumed, but the goods were now aimed at them, and they were particularly ephemeral – clothes, snack foods, soft drinks – compared to the longer lasting (but still ephemeral compared to elite consumer goods) items their parents had purchased. It was a form of anti consumerism, in the sense that young people who bought these items did not retain and use them as status markers to proclaim their class autonomy in the same way as their parents had done. In other words, these consumer items were designed not to last, not to be used as immobile affirmations of middle class or any other status like houses and cars in the driveway. Instead, they were attached to people who defined themselves in a radically new way than their parents had done by their consumer choices. These young people were mobile. If their parents bought cars with a view to exposing them proudly to their neighbours as status markers that they had finally arrived in the class structure, these young people, the MTV target audience, were extremely mobile, living in public spaces – shopping malls, movie theatres, cars, trips – instead of attaching their status and identity to fixed residences containing long-lasting goods. Consumer items and lifestyles portrayed on MTV had to be even more affordable than the items their parents had bought since young people had less money, but they had to be mobile as well – clothes, snack foods, etc. In this sense people cared less for the music they listened to on MTV than what owning a record represented. Worse, it was not necessary to own the record, only to watch the video since watching someone else's images is the most ephemeral of status markers – you have only to say you liked such and such a video to other people. The status pyramid that results lasts as long as the spoken conversation, which is to say not very long indeed.

The question is, did MTV invent this trend and thus influence people or did it simply reflect an already existing trend? I think MTV invented nothing but merely put in evidence what was already in place as a social phenomenon for several decades, since the 1960s. In that decade, young people rejected consumerism as a viable means of defining personal identity in class terms. They became detached not only from their parents' ideas of surrounding themselves with items as markers of a new social identity, they also became detached from everything their parent's world represented. If the 1950s saw people defining themselves through material goods, the 60s and 70s saw people experimenting with alternative means of identifying themselves, especially with ephemeral markers such as spiritual identity, clothes, music

preferences, foods eaten, etc. When MTV came along, it merely responded to this trend by furnishing anti-consumerist items (images of clothes that instantly went out of fashion, snack foods that were eaten on the run, etc.).

I think, all in all, television has never had the influence people attributed to it. When people say it is television that influences styles and patterns of behaviour, people are simply wrong because they do not want to legitimate the basis for what had been the world's first successful experiment in mass democracy and mass consumption, the creation of the middle class by middle class consumption patterns. Although people and social critics sometimes cite isolated cases in which some idiot jumps off a building trying to imitate superman or some other superheros, my point is that these are exceptions that prove the rule because they feed the intellectual critique of television as purveyors of crass middle-class junk. If there were no critique of the middle class, there would be no critique of television's potential influence on people. By saying that it is television that influences popular culture, critics of television's low culture are denying the critical role people had in shaping their own destinies by buying middle class consumer items, and let's not forget that as more and more people became middle class, they created a dynamic social and cultural force that ignored the old social pyramid of rooted values in which cultural critics trained to think in terms of high classical culture occupied an important space as ideologues of traditional elites.