

Popular culture's influence on society



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Is society influenced by and organised around popular culture? Do some films, novels or songs have an effect on social relations and ritual?

For instance, do the releases of major films, or the spread in popularity of certain novels and songs, have a significant effect on social relations and ritual? Discuss, focusing on recent examples, in light of sociological theory.

This essay will examine the extent to which society may be influenced by and organised around popular culture. An introductory section will define key terms, before going on to analyse the opening question through a sustained focus on one key area of popular culture, that of television and its audiences. The essay will restrict itself to UK programming and scheduling. Following sections will assess the possible effects on social relations and on ritual, and will incorporate relevant sociological theories, approaches and concepts, and in particular a focus on the concept of ideology. The main thrust of the essay will be from a Marxist perspective, and will use ideas derived from Karl Marx and his successors in left-wing sociological thought.

Storey (2001, pp. 1 – 16) defines popular culture as being conceptualised in several different, though overlapping, ways. Often, for Storey (2001, p. 1), popular culture is an “ empty conceptual category” always defined “ in contrast to other conceptual categories: folk culture, mass culture, dominant culture, working-class culture” and so on. Storey (2001, pp. 1 – 15) offers six working start-points: first, that popular culture is simply that which is well liked with many people. In television terms, we might examine programmes or channels with high viewerships, or who cater to a general audience rather than to a niche. Second, that popular culture is what’s left over when high

culture or art is discounted, that it's the preserve of ITV or ITV2 rather than, say, Sky Arts or BBC4, channels that feature content we might understand as high culture, such as Proms concerts and biographies of arts movements.

Storey's third definition is of popular culture as being a mass culture. This is seen as a pejorative, in that (Storey, 2001, p. 9) such output is over-commercialised and bland, offering easy unthinking (and often American) entertainment. Notable work was done by the Frankfurt School of post-Marxist theorists such as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, in this regard.

Fourth of Storey's definitional possibilities refers to popular culture as being authentic folk culture of the people, as opposed to that which is provided to them by cultural and economic elites. Storey (2001, p. 10) critiques this as being overly-romanticised, with a definitional issue in understanding quite who "the people" might be, and an avoidance of the capitalist context in which much popular culture is produced and disseminated. Could there really be, with the possible exception of community television services (Ponsford, 2014) such as those offered in some UK localities – examples include London Live and the Humber region's Estuary TV – a folk television that would be popular according to this potential definition?

The fifth of Storey's definitions, and the one that his writing leans towards supporting, draws upon Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony. Hegemony is the term given to the intellectual and cultural domination of the people by elites over and above that physical domination which may be achieved through political and cultural organisations and ultimately the rule of law backed by force in the operation of those elites. A

hegemonical approach, for Gramsci, explains how and why the people are controlled; it is done through their implied consent through inaction. Storey (2001, p 10) develops this, seeing the popular culture is not necessarily a mechanism for domination and control, but a site of negotiation; there are processes of incorporation and resistance, moving along at least two axes. The first of these axes (Storey, 2001, p10) is historical; a programme such as the BBC 1980s sitcom *The Young Ones* may be anarchic and subversive on one generation, but safely nostalgic in another. The second axis is synchronic, so that the perceived cultural value or status of a given text or practice may move “ between resistance and incorporation at any given moment” (Storey, 2001, p. 10). The recently-cancelled BBC programme *Top Gear* may be simultaneously controversial, anarchic, morally conservative, patriarchal, classist and/or safely bland entertainment depending on one’s reading of the programme (Baird, 2014).

Storey (2001, pp. 1 – 16) goes on to outline five competing definitions of ideology. First, there is the perhaps straightforward notion of ideology as a coherent system of concepts and ideas understood by a defined group of people. Second, the definition of ideology as that which masks a truth beneath; an ideology is a distortion of the true picture that is passed off as truth itself. Here, there is a question of inequalities in power to be perhaps considered when looking at examples; this will be considered with regards to television scheduling, in the next section. The third of the definitions that Storey considers relates to the ways in which cultural texts (such as individual television episodes or whole series of shows) present a consistent

worldview. Such a worldview may be deliberately skewed, and thus, in Storey's terms, be both political and ideological.

Storey's fourth definition draws on the work of Louis Althusser, whose "main contention is to see ideology not simply as a body of ideas but as a material practice" (Storey, 2001, p. 4). Habits, routines and customs have the effect, according to this perspective, of capturing us inside the social order; television viewership will be examined with this in mind. The fifth and final of Storey's definitional aspects of ideology draws on Roland Barthes' work, particularly his notion that (Storey, 2001, p. 5) "ideology operates mainly at the level of connotations", and that subconscious inferences are provoked or allowed to be drawn that favour hierarchies and power-wielders in society.

So, popular culture is definitionally challenging and may be the site of top-down attempts to control or persuade the population towards the interests of social elites, and may also be the site also of what Storey (2001, p. 10) terms "struggle between the 'resistance' of subordinate groups in society and the forces of 'incorporation' operating in the interests of dominant groups in society". For Croteau and Hoynes (2003, p. 15) mass media, of which television is a significant aspect, plays "a crucial role in almost all aspects of daily life" its social significance extending beyond communication and entertainment, affecting "how we learn about the world and interact with each other". Television is a dominant medium, there being over 95% of UK households having at least one television set according to regulatory body Ofcom (BBC, 2014). Its penetration exceeds that of the internet, with only 73% of UK homes having domestic internet connections (Office for National Statistics, 2013). Our experience of major political events, such as the 2015

UK general election, is a mediated one; we experience it through our laptops, smart phones and through our television screens as much, if not more, than our unmediated selves do. So the ways in which politics are represented on our screens may have importance for our understanding of politics. Often, as in the 2015 election, issues may be simplified or essentialised; the current vogue for leader debates perhaps inevitably focusing on the personalities and performance of the party leaders, rather than on issue-based and record-based politics (BBC, 2015).

Though the digital switchover has complicated the situation somewhat, offering the Freeview service of over 40 – mostly niche – channels to all viewers, (Evening Standard, 2012), the main (and former terrestrial channels in the pre-2012 days of analogue broadcast) channels: BBC 1 and 2, ITV, Channels 4 and 5, operate a system whereby schedules are designed according to viewership. The viewing day “ is divided into a number of time zones. The most important time zone is peak time, or prime time ... from 7 p. m. to 10. 30 p. m., and it is at that time that the television audience is largest” (Stewart, Lavelle & Kowaltzke, 2001, p. 235). Correspondingly, this is when the channel will broadcast its best-performing shows.

The TV schedule in itself may provoke a form of social ritual; people gather communally at the same time in their own homes to watch their favourite shows. Being able to hold conversations and opinions about soap opera storylines, reality contest contestants, televised sports events, new dramas and the like, is an aspect of everyday life. The perception of such a communal experience may be seen as a positive, a kind of social glue uniting the “ imagined community” of the citizenship of the UK (Benedict Anderson, <https://assignbuster.com/popular-cultures-influence-on-society/>

1981). Alternatively, it may be seen as a negative; a site of the kind of hegemonic processes warned about by Gramsci as outlined above.

A sample view of an evening's viewing may illustrate this. Taking the BBC1 prime time 7 – 10. 30 p. m. schedule for Tuesday 25th August 2015 as a snapshot specimen (Radio Times, 2015), the schedule runs thus: The One Show, EastEnders, Holby City, New Tricks, the Ten O'Clock News. EastEnders and Holby City are long-running soap operas. The One Show is a weekday magazine programme offering celebrity interviews and light entertainment features. Both Holby City and New Tricks offer public service employees (the NHS and the police respectively) in the course of their daily duties.

Different approaches, as summarised above, might take different views of these programmes. A mass culture approach, for example, might critique the formulaic nature of each of these programmes, and their rote characters and situations going beyond that to concern itself with the ways in which audiences are lulled into accepting the preferred or dominant reading. These might include: an acceptance of celebrity and the trappings of success as worthy of merit and positive comment in a capitalist society, a focus on the fake problems of soap opera others than on your own problems and issues, an acceptance of the power and authority of the state and its agents, as represented here by the NHS and the loveable curmudgeons of the character-actor cast of police comedy-drama New Tricks.

That, though, may be overly negative an approach. Audiences are active, and not necessarily passive. The dominant reading is not the only possibility; oppositional or resistant readings “ are made when a person finds their own

life experiences are at odds with the views in the text” (Stewart, Lavelle & Kowaltzke, 2001, p. 27). Negotiated readings are made when “ mental negotiations are needed to overcome some disagreement with the text” (Stewart, Lavelle & Kowaltzke, 2001, p. 27). Over time, sociological positions have shifted from a media effects perspective, where a simplistic sender-receiver – or hypodermic needle – model of communication assumed that audiences would passively take in what was broadcast or otherwise transmitted to them towards more inclusive models (Branston and Stafford, 2006, 271).

Television audiences are engaged, active and perhaps increasingly proactive about their viewing. Models of audience behaviour such as the uses and gratifications model focus not on the television programme but on the audience and “ emphasises what the audiences and readerships of media products do with them”, power being positioned not with the broadcaster but with the consumer, who navigates and negotiates constantly to gratify their own needs and their particular interests (Branston and Stafford, 2006, 275 – 6). In an age of real-time commentary on television viewing through social media services such as Facebook and Twitter, the active and engaged audience member may add their own voice, and interact with others adding their own, all from their sofa, or though time-shifting and on-demand services such as the BBC’s iPlayer service, can resist, create or subvert the schedules by devising their own should they wish.

This essay has approached the question of social ritual and relations in popular culture by focusing on television schedules and audiences. It has suggested that there is an importance attached to popular culture and its

study, and that there are, and have been over time, a range of theoretical alternatives put forward to better understand the ways in which texts and audience engagement may be analysed. This essay has focused on Marxist and post-Marxist approaches, though there are others. The fact of the television schedule implies a set of social rituals; communal viewing at specified times and comment on them as a form of social glue as examples. The social relations we have in an interconnected society are perhaps necessarily mediated ones, and television remains a – if not the – dominant broadcast, entertainment and communications medium. For that alone it deserves serious study. The essay asserts that audiences may best be conceptualised as active and engaged, and in the age of social media, that serves to reinforce the network of social relations and rituals underpinned by our experiences of watching, commenting and interacting with television programming.

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