

## WHAT IS POPULAR CULTURE?

A 1992 paper, *The Folklore of Industrial Society* (Levine, 1992) by Lawrence Levine, examines the concept of popular culture against African American folklore history. This concept was discussed and contested by Robin Kelley, Professor of American History, Natalie Zemon Davis a Canadian and American historian, and Jackson Lears, an American cultural and intellectual historian. This Historiography examines Levine's 1992 paper and the responses to that paper by the above mentioned authors. The term 'popular culture' was created by Johann Gottfried Herder who became founder of a new school of German political thought during the 1760s (Forster, 2007).

Levine's paper examines popular culture within the African American community recognising that like life itself, culture has many strata and sub-strata levels to its actuality. However, the premise remains the same worldwide; it is simply wrapped in different packages. Many scholars scorned the idea of popular culture. Mass culture was described by the sociologist Bernard Rosenberg via the road of moral relativisms<sup>1</sup>, as being: "cretinize," "brutalize," "totalitarianism," "garbage," "ghastliness," "cultural pap and gruel," "illusion," "sub-art" "pseudo-knowledge (Levine, 1992: 1371)." As with all cultural aspects, culture is defined by the observer and by their worldview, thus although Rosenberg's moral relativisms are blunt and brutal, with a right to hold that perspective, it does not make his observations

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<sup>1</sup> Emrys Westacott. 2006. Moral relativism is the view that moral judgments are true or false only relative to some particular standpoint (for instance, that of a culture or a historical period) and that no standpoint is uniquely privileged over all others. It has often been associated with other claims about morality: notably, the thesis that different cultures often exhibit radically different moral values; the denial that there are universal moral values shared by every human society; and the insistence that we should refrain from passing moral judgments on beliefs and practices characteristic of cultures other than our own (Westacott, 2006).

apodeictic across the cultural spectrum. Rosenberg's description of mass culture reveals more about his worldview than of mass culture itself.

A leading question examined was; "Is popular culture created by the producer or the consumer?" Lears addresses this question citing; "who would deny consumers a place alongside producers in the process of constructing cultural meanings (Lears, 1992: 1417)?" inferring that Levine completely separates the consumer from the producer. Levine responded with the assertion that there are no cultural historians who; "would deny consumers a place alongside producers in the process of constructing cultural meanings (Levine, 1992: 1427)." Different roles are played; a producer will try to create popular culture, but only a consumer can make or break that attempt. Levine argues his point in relation to folklore and his theory holds value because even a producer will lock onto a folk tale in attempts to capitalise upon that lore. Therefore, popular culture is created by both consumer and producer.

Lears was quite scathing of Levine's theories concerning the connection between folk lore and popular culture, to which Levine addresses in his 'Response (Levine, 1992).' Levine notes that 'Jackson Lears was under the impression that Levine's paper was primarily about 'power relationships (Levine, 1992: 1427)<sup>2</sup>' and 'based on assumptions, critiques a paper that Levine does not recognise (Levine, 1992: 1427)'. Levine furthers his critique of Lears comments by linking Lears to 'professors, students, teachers and lay people' who think that

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<sup>2</sup> Power relationships are set to influence people's behaviours as Philipp Stoeberl relates: 'Leadership and power are often used to influence people's behavior. However, little is known about the degree and directional relationship between these two constructs and gender. Equally unknown is the degree of impact that culture and gender together may have on such a relationship. However, gender plays an important role in cross-cultural environments. There is an importance when considering a specific culture (Philipp A. Stoeberl, 1998).'

popular culture is not worth discussing or researching, and those who believe that popular culture has little to do with its meaning and structure (Levine, 1992: 1427).

However, he does agree that Lears 'may be correct' that there are no cultural historians who; "would deny consumers a place alongside producers in the process of constructing cultural meanings (Levine, 1992: 1427)."

Levine addresses both Kelley and Davis' comments, citing that they recognised the meaning and significance that popular culture holds for historians, and how these sources can become neglected avenues of information. They can become a lost opportunity for scholars; the people who constitute popular cultural audiences (Levine, 1992: 1427). Kelley also argues that more emphasis on power relations should have been addressed by Levine (Kelley, 1992: 1404). Levine noted that 'the dialectic<sup>3</sup> between the creators and the receivers made him hesitate to make power relationships a central part of his essay (Levine, 1992: 1428).' Levine agrees with Kelley's argument that; "the question of power and access to the tools of production (Kelley, 1992: 1404)," were absent from his discussion, noting that "without this part of the equation, we can never fully understand the role of audiences (Levine, 1992: 1428)."

Levine quite enjoyed Davis' nuanced discussion, commenting; "Davis's erudite comparative framework is especially illuminating (Levine, 1992: 1428)<sup>4</sup>." Davis also recognises the

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<sup>3</sup> New World Encyclopedia. Aug. 2013. The Dialectic is a general emphasis on the permanence of being. The dialectic movement refers either to a mental process or to a process believed to occur in objective reality (Encyclopedia, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Comparative Cultural Studies is, according to Tötösy de Zepetnek . 2002. "a field of study in the humanities and social sciences where tenets of the discipline of comparative literature are merged with the field of cultural studies; the objects of study are all sorts of 'culture' and culture products including literature. Work in comparative cultural studies is

symbiotic relationship between creator and creation through her “hegemonic model of radio and film production (Davis, 1992: 1410),” modified by audiences to “produce a demonstrable effect on the narrative and artistic choices of producers (Davis, 1992: 1410).” One cannot exist without the other; why write a sonnet if there is no audience, why write a book if there is no reader? Sometimes demand plays a role in creating popular culture, but first, something had to occur to require demand. There must be communication between the creator culture and the consumer culture for there to be either.

Davis rightly highlights the fact that Levine was writing to a specific culture, there may have been many sub-cultures within the layers, but Levine’s paper was directly aimed at “assumptions in regard to "folk culture" and "popular culture" in nineteenth and twentieth-century America (Davis, 1992: 1409).” Levine reiterates that fact once again in a response aimed at Lears.

Lear’s openly vehement assertions that Levine’s path is cluttered with ‘dead horse and straw men (Lears, 1992: 1417)’ arguments, looks to be a deliberate provocation of Levine himself. Lear’s article from beginning to end reads as if there was a personal rivalry between himself and Levine. Levine suggests in his ‘Folklore (Levine, 1992)’ article that; ‘to the Left, popular culture looked like the attempt of ruling classes to exert hegemony (dominance), over

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performed in a contextual and relational manner and with a plurality of methods and approaches, in inter-disciplinarity, and, if and when required, in team work. In comparative cultural studies the processes of communicative action(s) in culture – and the way, these processes work – constitute the objectives of research and study. However, comparative cultural studies do not exclude traditional textual analysis or other established fields of study (Zepetnek, 2002).” According to *Jens Alber, 1995*. “Comparative research on welfare states has most focused on social transfers as the dependent variable. As demographic changes make social services increasingly important ingredients of welfare state production, however, it will be necessary to shift the research agenda accordingly, and to take services more systematically into account (Alber, 1995).”

the masses; to the Right, popular culture existed as confirmation of the fear that if the masses and those who cynically catered to their low tastes were given free rein, the entire society would be awash in a flood of cultural trivia (Levine, 1992: 1371).” Put into perspective, Levine appears to be affronting Lears.

Levine argued that popular culture is an artificial construct created for the purpose of monetary and ideological rationales, a creation 'for' the community but not 'by' the community (Levine, 1992: 1370). Kelley recognises that popular culture is used by historians to represent consciousness of producers and not consumers (Kelley, 1992: 1400). Davis notes that popular culture highlights assumptions shared along with the issues that divide the different strata's of society (Davis, 1992: 1416). Lears rightly states that 'choices were being made' by audiences, and the observation of non-choice reveals more about mass popular cultural expression than did those 'things' taken up by the masses (Lears, 1992: 1418).

Popular culture is a symbiotic relationship between creator and consumer. To create, there needs to be inspiration, but whether the creator observed their creation in a popular cultural setting first, makes the difference in that creations ability to become enmeshed in popular cultural ideology. For example; if the creator creates a clean, sparkling plastic boat with sails and anchor attached, to present to the consumer, as opposed to the dirty old worn down wooden boat their child had been playing with, then only one child needs to have that new boat to make the other children want one too. This ensures that many parents will scrimp and save to ensure that their child also receives a new plastic boat to keep up with the Joneses. Thus, popular culture of the masses is created if the creator creates what is, to make what could be.

## [Footnotes]

1. Emrys Westacott. 2006. Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Relativism.

Stable URL:

<http://www.iep.utm.edu/moral-re>

2. Philipp A. Stoerberl, Ik-Whan G. Kwon, Dongchul Han, Mueun Bae.

Women in Management Review. Vol.13 No.6 (1998) Pp. 208-216

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<http://www.emeraldinsight.com/doi/pdfplus/10.1108/09649429810232155>

3. New World Encyclopedia. 'Dialecic' Aug. 2013

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<http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Dialectic>

4. de Zepetnek, Steven Tötösy, ed.. 2002. Comparative Central European Culture. Edited by Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek. Purdue University Press.

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<http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt6wq7hx>

4.1 Jens Alber. A Framework for the Comparative Study of Social Services.

Journal of European Social Policy. Vol.5 No.2 (May, 1995) Pp.131-149

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