

Final Essay

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Popular culture plays an intricate, varied, fluid role today; it can be seen as a site of contestation over social values, a mirror of social structures, and a site that intervenes in social values and the development of cultural forms and practices. John Storey, in his pioneering article "What is Popular Culture?", describes popular culture as an "ideological battlefield" in which meanings, values, and identities are constructed, contested, and renegotiated. In a similar vein, when Pierre Bourdieu presented his work "Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste," he highlighted taste as one of the most important markers, to which becomes a tool of conscious and subconscious social stratification, exacerbating classism and hierarchical power dynamics. Building on this analysis, Laura Mulvey in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" elucidates gendered representations found in popular culture, whilst Dick Hebdige in "The Function of Subculture" draws attention to subcultural resistance towards mainstream cultural codes. This essay suggests that, notwithstanding or perhaps because of its complex negotiation of dynamics of authenticity as well as taste, gender, and subcultural identities, popular culture also gradually codifies distinctions, affirming social hierarchies and identities that are reliable and unstable. Still, these social and symbolic transformations work based on and within the broader societal tensions, moral pragmatism, and cultural struggles. Storey depicts popular culture as a fluid and contested realm in which dominant ideologies can be reinforced and resisted. Popular culture consists of the practices, texts, and artifacts widely consumed across various social groups and are frequently set in opposition to "high" or elite cultural products. Storey insists that the significance of popular culture is not merely statistical: it encompasses the relations of power and the processes through which cultural products achieve legitimacy and prominence. Popular culture thus simultaneously serves as an ideological instrument in the hands of the dominant

social groups while representing a site out of which oppositional and alternative discursive moments emerge.

Building on Storey's claims, popular culture is full of contradictions—it acts as a vehicle for social conformity while also being a place of resistance. Mainstream, a cultural commodity, such as commercial movies, TV series, popular music, etc., represents and naturalize social orders of race, class, gender, and consumerism. Within such cultural frameworks, however, counter-hegemonic interpretive work is constantly being produced to surface counter-readings that expose how ideologies and narratives are productive of social differences that do not conform to the orthodox ideals that are valorized and inserted into popular discourses. Leisure-time consumption is, therefore, the domain of a continual struggle between hegemonic groups seeking to impose their authority and counter-hegemonic groups trying to achieve social change.

Bourdieu's analysis supplements this framework by investigating taste as a mechanism of class distinction in its own right. For Bourdieu, taste is neither subjective nor objective but entirely embedded into social dynamics and power relations. Bourdieu introduces the idea of "cultural capital," explaining that knowledge, education, cultural literacy, and refined tastes serve as symbolic currency, bestowing legitimacy and prestige on powerful groups in society, especially the elite and upper-middle classes. Those with high levels of cultural capital are regarded as having more sophisticated or highbrow tastes, whereas those lacking cultural capital are frequently discredited or mocked. Taste, therefore, functions actively as a mechanism key to mediating class divisions and confirming existing social power dynamics. This complicated interplay becomes even more so when considering the popular culture vs. authenticity paradigm. Authenticity is a fetish for reality, individual experience, or genuine emotion. However, consumers have embraced a new popular culture that at least appears authentic, forming an

essential part of our contemporary times, in sharp contrast to the masses of commodities of mass production. However, even authenticity within popular culture is commoditized, prepackaged, marketed, and sold as a marker that paradoxically reinforces rather than displaces social divisions. From reality television to indie music, hip-hop, and alternative cinema, widespread phenomena today self-consciously brand themselves as authentic experiences, even as they are systematically structured from the commercial inputs and mediated frameworks they are contained by.

Extending Bourdieu's observations, authenticating cultural consumption tends to reproduce rather than erase class boundaries. Various cultural practices, such as artisanal food and drink, independent music, vintage clothing, organic lifestyles, etc., often function as markers of class-based cultural capital. Instead of democratizing cultural access, these actual commodities perpetuate hierarchies, creating authenticity as a privilege of the rich or culturally favored few. Thus, authenticity operates in a paradoxical manner, which gives consumers an illusion of transgression whilst simultaneously reproducing and maintaining class hierarchies. By exposing the gender dynamics within popular culture, Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" adds depth to the critical approach. One of the things Mulvey does is criticize the way popular media creates narratives and visual spectacles that suit the male gaze and readers and thus reinforce patriarchy. Women are depicted as passive beings for visual consumption by men repeatedly through cinematic mechanisms like framing, editing, and narrative motifs, which reinforces the existing social hierarchy of gender. In this way, pop culture may reinforce class divisions but also exacerbate gender disparities as well, highlighting the interrelated nature of cultural production and consumption with wider systems of oppression and privilege. By delving into subcultures, the writer gives this talk more depth subcultures are modes of defiance and

subversive redefinitions of existing dominant episteme. Subcultures generate symbolic meanings and styles through bricolage processes, appropriating and recontextualizing cultural symbols and, thus, questioning mainstream norms, according to Hebdige. Punk subcultures, for instance, actively clash with accepted aesthetic codes and social values, subverting conventional hierarchies of class, taste, and authenticity. Within subcultures, authentic expression is reclaimed, contested, and negotiated, demonstrating the significant capacity of popular culture for real resistance and counter-cultural meanings.

This is not to say that there isn't a relationship between subcultures and dominant culture, which is far from it. Resistance and co-optation are consubstantial aspects of popular culture, where subcultural styles and expressions are absorbed, commercialized, and repackaged for wider consumption. As we moved past upholding distinctions through compromise, all the way to popular culture as the tension between deterioration and creativity in popular forms, with popular culture as the dual opportunity, it very much became a dialectic to undermine the whole, along with the tensions that exist as the largest on the inside. Furthermore, the evolution of technology and the growth of digital culture have introduced additional facets to popular culture. By creating, distributing, and actively describing cultural works, social networks, and digital media platforms enable unprecedented participation and democratization of cultural production. This digital engagement further obfuscates the distinctions between producers and consumers, pressuring traditional cultural authority and authenticity regimes. However, even with the equalizing potential of this digital age, structural inequalities are present — dividing not only technology access but also introducing significant discrepancies regarding the level of digital literacy among different socioeconomic groups and their cultural visibility, thereby perpetuating existing social divisions. In the end, popular culture embodies profound paradoxes, reinforcing

and questioning social order systems. Storey defines popular culture as dynamic, complex, and contested, contrasting with Bourdieu's emphasis on hierarchical measures of inclusion and exclusion found in cultural capital and taste. This resonates with Mulvey and Hebdige, who elaborates upon popular culture's intersection with gender and subcultural identification, reproducing and resisting various fields of social power. The multifaceted role of authenticity within this framework illustrates how cultural consumption reproduces the existing structures of power, even while providing portals for meaningful challenges and possibilities for change.

In this intersectionality, we also find a struggle of class and money, both economic and cultural. Popular culture is a dynamic field of contestation that produces negotiations of meaning and reflects politics of ideological struggle that shape social realities. While it upholds and sustains power structures, hierarchy, and gender roles, it also offers essential spaces for subversion, reinterpretation, and potential social change. A framing wherein such complexities are acknowledged provides a more nuanced picture of popular culture as a dynamic, mobilized site with stakeholders in a never-ending contact sport of power.

References:

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