Is Popular Culture Legitimate?

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Résumé: *Le présent ouvrage va tenter de répondre à la question: la culture de masse en général et plus spécialement la culture de masse américaine est-elle légitime ou non ? Par quels moyens s'est validée la culture populaire, comment agit-elle sur les formes de la culture «élevée» légitimées précédemment? La légitimation de certains modèles culturels entraîne le processus inverse, de délégitimation d'autres modèles ? L'analyse des modèles de la culture de masse à titre de formes culturelles (in)valides nous conduira aux théories traditionnelles, plus ou moins conservatrices, de Matthew Arnold, F. R. Leavis, Adorno et Horkheimer, Walter Benjamin mais aussi aux théories plus récentes: Raymond Williams, Frederic Jameson, Nachbar et Lause, Peter Burke, qui se montrent intéressés par la consolidation de la culture en tant qu'institution qui légitime ses diverses formes. L'approche théorique vise la relation entre la connaissance et la vérité dans la culture et la relation entre la politique et l'économie, en empruntant deux voies qui mènent à la légitimation dans le monde postmoderne (selon Lyotard) : la performativité et la paralogie.*

Keywords: *Popular Culture, high/low culture, culture industry, consumerism, (de)legitimation, analogy, performativity, paralogy.*

Writing about popular culture is not an easy task, mainly because it is still a contested field, implying a number of questions and answers upon which the anthropologists and sociologists have not yet agreed. Is popular culture synonymous with "low" or "folk' culture? What distinguishes it from "high" or "learned" culture? And are the terms "low" and "high" still in use or are they obsolete, referring to older views on cultural manifestations which no longer reflect the more recent patterns of the postmodern world? And if this were the case, would popular culture still reflect the values and beliefs that we have built for ourselves or would it affect and ruin them? Is popular culture harmful or is it a profitable business, meant to hold large masses of people under control? And who are the "people"? Everybody? Ordinary? The elite? In other words, how legitimate is popular culture and when was it, if ever, legitimized?

The premise from which I will start this analysis is that popular culture is indeed a form of culture. It is an acknowledged fact that popular culture emerged in Germany at the end of the eighteenth century and that its rise and spread in Europe and America are the effects of nineteenth-century industrialization and implementation of democratic political systems. In their turn, these two phenomena led to the enlargement of the middle class and a tendency towards the leveling of people's values and lifestyle, irrespective of the class these people may have belonged to. The strong interconnection between culture and economics had turned culture

into some kind of business and its products into forms of consumption. Yet, when and how did popular culture become legitimate?

A diachronic analysis of popular culture reveals the concept as "an invention" of late eighteenth century when the rise of the national consciousness implied, and ran parallel with, the culture of the ordinary people. According to John Storey, a contemporary English analyst of popular culture, "the «discovery» of folk culture was an integral part of emerging European nationalism"[1]. The farther and deeper the nationalist wave swept over Europe, the more important the discovery of national traditions and folk customs became, as they were identified with the nature and character of a nation. Folk songs were collected as early as the eighteenth century (e.g. the publication of Herder's *Folk Songs* in 1778) and volumes of folk poems and stories were published throughout the nineteenth century (e.g. the Grimm brothers' *Household and Children's Tales*, 1812), not to mention the Romantic movement throughout Europe and its dream to return to the simple virtues of nature as a means to overcome the artificiality of city culture[2]. Yet, in spite of the growing interest in folk culture at the time, it was not enough to have it recognized as a legitimate form of culture.

While mass culture rises, mostly as an effect of industrialization, there appear more frequent pro- and con- debates on the distinction between "high" and "low". As Raymond Williams argues in his "Introduction" to *Culture and Society* (1958), the word "culture" becomes one of the key-terms that suffers changes in the nineteenth century in its strive towards legitimation. Tracing the changes in the meaning of culture back to the eighteenth century, Williams shows that from its primary meaning, that of "natural growth", culture came to cover, by analogy, "a process of human training" to reflect the changes in mentality during the Enlightenment[3]. Similarly, from its use in a strict context as a "culture *of* something", it extended to "*culture* as such, a thing in itself", a meaning that it acquired in the nineteenth century. Williams connects the development of the term culture to the great social and historical changes that took place in the nineteenth century, which triggered similar changes in the basic meaning of other terms such as "industry", "democracy", "class" and "art." Of all these words, "culture" shows "a complexity of idea and reference", as it encompassed the other changes in the society and it came to mean "a whole way of life, material, intellectual and spiritual". Celebrated or contested, provoking hostility or embarrassment, "culture" legitimized itself as an institution in the nineteenth century when it changed its focus from the individual mind to the society as a whole, reflecting its crisis and progress. While culture legitimized itself as an institution, its mass forms were still in the process of becoming legitimate. The tension within culture between its elitist and mass forms is analyzed by Matthew Arnold in his famous *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), in which the working-class lived forms of culture are identified with popular culture and referred to as "anarchical", raw and uncultivated, undermining real culture, described as "the best that has been thought and said in the world"[4]. By giving the first comprehensive definition of culture, Arnold argues that it is singular, universal, atemporal and absolute, legitimizing itself as nation-based and state-based. So, while the presence of culture represents the law, its absence or its mass manifestations lead to chaos and anarchy. As only a minority can reach "sweetness and light", that is knowledge and truth through culture; it is legitimized only as elitist, excluding any other possible forms.

Arnold's theory is revisited in the 1930s by F. R. Leavis in England and Adorno and Horkheimer in Germany. Leavis and his circle argue that the twentieth century witnesses an increasing cultural decline, characterized by "standardization and leveling down"[5]. He even proposes a sustained campaign against the homogeneous tendency in culture, which should be started from schools. The reason for the decline of culture lies in exaggerated democratization which entails, in fact, the constant undermining of authority and the loss of political and social control. Adorno and Horkheimer, both representing the Frankfurt School, bring a fresh (at the time) view on mass culture and approach it on economic grounds. Influenced by Marxist theories, they consider that, as a form of superstructure, culture had become dependent on industry and that the products and processes of mass culture are actually products of "culture industry", a new term coined and introduced in the paradigm of culture as early as 1947 (*The Dialectic of the Enlightenment*. Adorno and Horkheimer's theory links the rise and spread of popular culture in the latter half of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth with the use and growth of the state-capital on one side and with the emergence and development of mass-media on the other. Revisited in later works by the Frankfurt School's representatives, the coined term of "cultural industry" describes the vital role played by industry in molding tastes and preferences and in manipulating people's consciousness through the encouragement, and imposition, of false needs and desires. According to Adorno, culture industry

> *forces together the spheres of high and low art, separated for thousands of years*. The seriousness of high art is destroyed in the speculation about its efficacy; the seriousness of the lower perishes with the civilizational constraints imposed on the rebellious resistance inherent within it as long as social control was not yet total[6] (italics mine).

The effects of culture industry are therefore disastrous, as it destroys both the higher and the lower forms of culture, in an open process of delegitimation. If popular culture were the product of the culture industry, its consumers would not be primary, but secondary, they would not be its subject, but its object, they would not choose cultural forms, but be compelled to accept them as simple commodities.

Though a member of the Frankfurt School, Walter Benjamin opposes Adorno's theory, stressing upon a more democratic and participatory side of contemporary popular culture. Without minimizing the impact of industry and technology on culture, Benjamin has a more optimistic view regarding the participation of the masses in culture, which is seen not as an imposition or as a blind acceptance, but as a change in mode[7], resulted from the necessary and unavoidable implementation of economic and consumerist laws in culture.

Throughout the twentieth century, culture became a question of difference and identity, ethnicity and gender, largely connected to the evolution of the media. This has, according to Frederick Jameson, led to the emergence of two conflicting drives in the institution of culture: a drive towards heterogeneity and difference, pluralism and diversity and a drive towards standardization, homogeneity and leveling[8]. Legitimized as a consumerist form, popular culture thus oscillates between heterogeneity and homogeneity.

Incorporated in, or appropriated by, transnational cultural structures, popular culture seems to have undergone a process of democratization and transformation in the latter half of the twentieth century, from the culture of a community into "the lifestyle" of people in general and of various communities in particular. This view is also held by Jack Nachbar and Kevin Lause, who describe popular culture as "Zeitgeist" or "the spirit of an era"[9]. By approaching popular culture from the anthropological view, they use the multifaceted sign of "the house" as the model to best illustrate the complexities of popular culture. This inspired symbol is meant to express the universality and large accessibility of popular culture on the one hand, and the ties between popular culture and "the bedrock beliefs, myths and values" of the communities of people, on the other.

What Nachbar and Lause actually do is legitimizing popular culture through analogy. Just as the symbolism of the house if multi-faceted, so are the meanings and manifestations of popular culture. The floors of a house cannot be built without a solid basement; nor can the "floors" of popular culture exist without their particular "roots": the myths, beliefs and values of a people or community placed, in Nachbar's model, in the basement. The two floors, which Nachbar and Lause describe, are made up of, and from, "artifacts" and "objects and people". Thus, the first floor contains icons, stereotypes, heroes, celebrities, while the second counts arts, habits, and rituals. On top of them all, there is the roof, representing actual manifestations of popular culture in daily life. The two floors are built above the basement, which contains the "cultural mindset" of a people or community, or their "bedrock values and beliefs".

The analogical model, through which popular culture is striving to legitimize itself, is based on various representations chosen either from social life (house, way, route) or from nature (root). Described as a house by Nachbar and Lause, as the "whole way of life" by Raymond Williams and as a "root" in, and a "route" to, the forming of cultural identity by John Storey[10], popular culture seems to have found legitimation through analogy with social and natural models. However, the analogical model is descriptive and representational and, therefore, imperfect or incomplete. Moreover, the house of popular culture (Nachbar and Lause's model) seems to suit American culture, but can it also be applied to European forms? And lastly, popular culture has been diversified and has flourished in all its forms in postmodernity. How does it represent it?

Popular culture has lately been described as a form and product of postmodern culture. Jean Baudrillard argues that we live in a hyper-real world of simulacra as a result of the invasion of the media in our lives, which lead to the proliferation of the signifier at the expense of the signified[11]. Susan Sontag[12] and Andreas Huyssen[13] share similar views. To them, popular culture bridges the two older forms, thus easing the tension between "high" and "low"; it is therefore the form and product of postmodernity, its mirror and illustration at the same time. Once again, popular culture seems to reach legitimation through analogy: it is a bridge. Yet, how does popular culture manage to express knowledge and truth in the postmodern age? In his *Postmodern Condition*, Jean Lyotard argues, as early as the 1970s, that knowledge in its narrative forms and as scientific discourse is legitimized "through performativity" and "by paralogy". Taking into consideration the fact that knowledge, in all its forms, is basic to culture,

I will argue that popular culture may also reach legitimation through performativity and by paralogy.

In Lyotard's text, the principle of performativity refers to the use of technology through which efficiency, which replaces truth in a postmodern society, may be attained. A performative system is a system that does not pertain to the true, the just, and the beautiful, but to the efficient[14]. Moreover, a performative system obeys the principle of discourse games or of a metalanguage that is universal, but not consistent[15]. In Baudrillard's view, metalanguage is characteristic of hyper-reality which favors form to content. If scientific knowledge may be legitimized through performativity, so may popular culture. Unlike science, supposed to refer to reality, whose meaning has actually become a ground for debate, popular culture invents its own realities, most of which being performed through high technology. Thus, to the principle of performativity, I would add the principle of performance as, unlike the scientific discourse, popular culture manifests itself through all performing means pertaining to the senses: visual, auditory, olfactory, tactile.

The principle of performativity, however, has two opposite effects on popular culture: one, it invites to competition; two, it leads to reduplication, multiplication, and globalization. An example to this effect is the "theme park". Invented as an amusement park and fair zone in the nineteenth century, it developed, through competition, to Disneyland, it extended to other themes (e.g. Las Vegas) and turned global while striving to become more and more performative. Another example could be the McDonald system which became efficient through performativity and reached the global scale as a consequence. Moreover, to be efficient also means to be saleable and popular culture, as a product of consumerism, would not exist without a high interest in sale parameters.

Thirdly, popular culture may be legitimated by paralogy (Gr. *para logos* = beyond reason). The paralogic model is based on both formal and informal fallacies. The former means that a deductive argument does not imply anything about the premises of the argument or its conclusion. The latter means that the argument is embedded in rhetorical patterns that obscure the logical connections between statements. Moreover, informal fallacies may also exploit the emotions or psychological weaknesses of the audience. I argue that popular culture manifestations and / or products may reveal both kinds of fallacy. Let us take, for example, iconic figures such as megastars or the Barbie doll. The premises according to which a certain person should become a megastar or Barbie should be *the* doll of the children are obscure, hidden or confusing. Similarly, a negative figure (like Dracula) has derived various types, versions of the archetype, which exploit the emotions of the audience and create discourses among which there is no logical connection.

Legitimation by paralogy seems to best validate the large variety of popular culture forms. Moreover, it validates and justifies the plurality of popular culture forms pertaining to the diversity of communities that have developed or adopted them. By reaching legitimation through performativity and by paralogy, popular culture reveals itself in the plural, not as an encompassing narrative, but as a multitude of small cultures or, quoting Lyotard again, of "petites histories".

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[2] *Ibidem*, pp. 3, 4, 9.
[3] See Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society (1780–1950)*, New York, Evanston, San Francisco, London: Harper Torchbooks, 1958, pp. XIV-XV.
[4] Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960, p. 7.
[5] F.R. Leavis, Denys Thompson, *Culture and Environment* (1933), Westport C.T.: Greenwood Press, 1977, pp. 3, 188–189.
[6] Theodor Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, London: Routledge, 1991, p. 85.
[7] See Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", in *Illuminations*, London: Fontana, 1973, pp. 237–238, 240, 241.
[8] See Frederick Jameson, "Notes on Globalization as a Philosophical Issue", in *The Culture of Globalization*, ed. Frederick Jameson and Masao Miyoshi, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998, pp. 57–58.
[9] Jack Nachbar and Kevin Lause, *Popular Culture: An Introductory Text*, Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1992, p. 4.
[10] John Storey, *op. cit.*, p. 78.
[11] See Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (trans. by Sheila Faria Glaser), Ann Arbor: the University of Michigan Press, 1994.
[12,13] See Susan Sontag, (1966) *Against Interpretation*, London: Vintage, 1994, pp. 293, 296, 297, in which she emphasizes the existence of a "new sensibility" in the rise of postmodernity, which may bridge what she identifies as the "two cultures": the literary-artistic and the scientific, and consequently, will efface the border between high and low forms of culture.
[14] See Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986, pp. 47, vii, in which he signals an increasing less obvious distance between high art and consuming culture by which we may measure our own cultural postmodernity.
[15] Jean-François Lyotard, (1979) *The Postmodern Condition (A Report of Knowledge)*, trans. by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, *The Theory and History of Literature Series*, vol. 10, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992, p. 42.
[16] *Ibidem*, 43.

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