POPULAR CULTURE

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What is Popular Culture? – Defining Popular Culture

When thinking about popular culture and the importance that it holds within society, one has to look at the different types of ideology since "ideology is a crucial concept in the study of popular culture." (Storey 2009, 2) Ideology is a set of shared values and beliefs within a culture or sub-culture. Dominant ideology seems to play a crucial role in that of society and is the beliefs of the white, upper class men who are in control of the main organisations such as newspapers, the film industry or the music industry. Dominant ideology, according to John Storey in his book: Cultural Theory and Popular Culture, is used in "masking, distortion, or concealment" which present "distorted images of reality" (Storey 2009, 3)

Marxist theorist, Louis Althusser calls this the theory of 'false consciousness', where a certain ideology is used to control the masses without them. An example of this are newspapers, and how each newspaper is biased towards a certain political party. British newspaper, The Sun is a conservative paper and its readers are therefore more likely to support the Conservative party since The Sun is "the most read title in print, with readership across the month of 12.7m" (Ponsford 2015, PressGazette) Italian Marxist theorist, Antonio Gramsci uses the term 'hegemony' to explain how the "dominant class does not simply 'rule' a society, but actively 'leads' it though the exercise of moral and intellectual leadership." (Storey 2009, 56) and this is what newspapers do to their readers during election time: they influence their readers opinion through their portrayal of political parties.

Another reading of popular culture would be post-modernism. In his book, Cultural Theory and Popular Culture, Storey states that the post-modern outlook on popular culture is that "postmodern culture is a culture that no longer recognizes the distinction between high and popular culture"(Storey 2009, 12) meaning that it is determined to end the barriers to elitism. Storey explores the notion of the post-modernist approach to popular culture in his book: Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader and states that "for [Frederic] Jameson, postmodernism [...] is capitalism in its purest form, reaching to the
parts of the social formation that other stages of capitalism were unable to reach" (Storey 2009, 407) In his essay, *Genericty in the Nineties: Eclectic Irony and the New Sincerity*, Jim Collins looks at the idea of the bricolage, which is when texts are "recycled for circulation together with the new" (Collins 2009, 408). A television series that displays the idea of 'bricolage' is HBO's *Westworld*. At first glance, you think the show is a western; there are the stereotypical traits of the genre including a saloon and cowboys. But as the show continues to unfold, science fiction starts to reveal itself alongside romance. *Westworld* showcases the idea of a story inside a story and conveys the old fashioned ideas of the Wild West whilst portraying the technological advancements of the 21st century and also hides behind the beliefs of the elite being able to afford the better entertainment.

Dominant ideology is forever being moulded into something new and the middle/working class will forever be the people who are pushed into the state of 'false consciousness' to accept these new values and beliefs.

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The Politics of the Popular – Mass Culture

Texts that are deemed as popular culture are texts that are mass produced for the mass society and this can be supported Strinati, who states in his book: *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture*, "mass culture refers to popular culture which is produced by the industrial techniques of mass production, and marketed for profit to a mass public of consumers" (Strinati 2004, 10)

Television shows are mass produced over and over again in the capitalist scheme of 'supply and demand'. Companies see that the mass society enjoys a certain genre of television and then they go on to mass produce many more shows that are of the same genre. "Mass culture is a standardised, formulaic, repetitive and superficial culture" (Strinati, 2004, 12) and this can be seen when *Twilight* first came to cinema screens in 2008 and vampire television shows and movies such as *The Vampire Diaries* (2009), *True Blood* (2008) and *Let Me In* (2010) were instantly produced and released and then became worldwide phenomenon's.

One of the biggest shows to span the last few years has been *Game of Thrones* (2011). The season six season finale "drew the largest audience in the history of the series, with 8.9 million viewers tuning into HBO on Sunday night" (Koblin 2016), but even before the success of season six, *Game of Thrones* had a massive impact on the world of television. TV fans of *Game of Thrones* went looking for similar entertainment and found *Vikings* (2013), *Black Sails* (2014) and *The Last Kingdom* (2015). The bigger shows such as *Game of Thrones*, *Vikings* and *Black Sails* are American produced and conveys that Americanisation is having an impact on the television industry across the world. "Since it is the capitalist society most closely associated with these processes, it is relatively easy to identify America as the home of mass culture" (Strinati 2004, 20) and America has always been at the forefront of supplying the mass society with what they demand due to being the home of major film corporation: Hollywood.

Americanisation of culture began to rear its head during the World War Two. In his book *Dockers and...*
Detectives: A Reader, Worpole states that "it was in American fiction that many British working class readers [...] found a realism about city life, an acknowledgement of big business corruption, and an unpatronising portrayal of working class experience" (Worpole 1983, 35) Working class people and members of the mass society were beginning to relate to American fiction and decades later, we are still seeing American television stations such as HBO and AMC take over our television screens.

In An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture, Strinati states that "mass culture is therefore a culture which lacks intellectual challenge and stimulation" (Strinati 2004, 13) and Strinati conveys an excellent point; Americanisation is a theory that still applies to today's society and whilst we are watching these fantastic, high-budget shows that the U.S.A have produced, we are sat mindlessly in front of a box gazing at fiction worlds or scenarios. Since most people have access to television shows, whether it is on live TV or the internet, television will never become high-culture or 'elitist' due to a television being in almost every home in the world.

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Cultures of Resistance – Subculture

Throughout this essay, I will be looking at the sub-culture of 'emos'. Sub-cultures are referred to throughout society to recognise a certain group of people that have "an area of common symbols and meanings" (Hall and Whannel 2009, 46) whether they are 'hipsters', 'goths', 'chavs' or, as I am looking at, 'emos'.

Each sub-culture has their own ideologies and their own sense of style. Sometimes, there are sub-cultures within sub-cultures. For instance, the sub-culture of 'goth' was born from 'punk' and 'rockers', and then began to spread out to create other sub-cultures such as 'grebo', 'rocker', and 'emo'; this means that - as Hebdige describes in his book: Subcultures: The Meaning of Style - "the meaning of subculture is, then, always in dispute, and style is the area in which the opposing definitions clash" (Hebdige 2013, 3) In another one of Hebdiges' article's, Subculture in Guins, Raiford and Cruz, Omayra, "the emergence of a spectacular subculture is invariably accompanied by a wave of hysteria in the press [...] it fluctuates between dread and fascination, outrage and amusement." (Hebdige 1979, 356) and this happened when Sophie Lancaster was killed in 2007 due to wearing clothing that resembled the 'goth' and 'emo' subculture. (Daily Mail 2008) After the murder, a moral panic arose about the sub-culture of 'emo' and how dangerous the individuals of that sub culture were. Hebdige continues to address how subcultures therefore, can be deemed as a threat from the established systems or institutions in power, as they are not only a “metaphor for political anarchy” but an “actual mechanism of semantic disorder: a kind of temporary blockage in the system of representation” (Hebdige, 1979). Another case study that portrays the moral panic surrounding 'emos' was the suicide of Hannah Bond and media stations across the world automatically linked her death to the 'emo' band, My Chemical Romance, calling the band a 'suicide death cult'. (Daily Mail 2008)
The moral panics surrounding the 'emo' sub culture can be shown using the Hypodermic Needle theory that was coined by Stuart Hall. Hall claimed that “the media do not only record resistance, they situate it within the dominant framework of meanings” (Hebdige, 1979, 356), meaning that the media appears to reflect reality, but instead actually construct it within news frameworks, which therefore means that an audience will absorb and believe all information given to them from the media and this implies that the mass media has a large influence on how the public will see subcultures; especially when there is bad news surrounding a particular group.

The subculture of 'emo' are consistently getting negative representation in the media due to only negative press being published about them and since "the isolation of a subculture also becomes a major emphasis in the songs, lyrics […] teenage films [that] culture has provided" (Hall and Whannel 2009, 47), the media are taking those songs and those lyrics and posing them as an offence towards society and harmful towards children.

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Throughout this essay, I will be looking at race throughout television and film and more specifically. In his essay, 'Race', Racism and Representation', John Storey states that "'race' is a cultural and historical category, a way of making difference signify between people of a variety of skin tones" and that when discussing 'race', it can only mean that there is "only one human race and [...] human biology does not divide people into different 'races'; it is racism." (Storey 2009, 168)

In the 21st century, racism throughout television and film is subtler and is classed as 'new racism', which Van Dijk states is "different from the old racism of slavery, segregation" and that new racism "wants to be democratic and respectable, and hence first off denies that it is racism." (Van Dijk 2000, 34) There have been more discussions about the diversity within the media, with actors such as Will Smith boycotting award shows because they do not feel as if their skin colour is being recognised within Hollywood. The lack of recognition within the film and TV industry can be classed as new racism as "they are expressed, enacted and con- firmed by [...] movies and TV programmes [...] among hundreds of other genres."(Van Dijk 2000, 34) Recently, there was uproar that Moonlight won best picture at the 2017 Oscar's - Moonlight being about a black man who is gay and living in the slums. Alongside winning best picture, the lead actor - Mahershala Ali - is also the first actor to win an award for Best Actor who is also a Muslim. Being 2017 and having this amount of diversity after a very long battle, conveys that "racism consists of everyday discriminatory practices, on the micro-level of analysis, and organizations, institutions." (Van Dijk 2000, 35)

Netflix's Luke Cage contains an all-black cast; however, upon watching the television show, black people - yet again - are portrayed as drug lords, 'gangstas' and fighters. So even though there is black representation, it is still in a negative way. Van Dijk continues to state that "we learn racism (or anti-racism) largely through text" - page 36 and because "the media elites are ultimately responsible for the
prevailing discourses of the media they control" they influence "people's knowledge, attitudes and ideologies" (Van Dijk 2000, 36) Through Antonio Gramsci’s theory of hegemony, the media can control what they want their viewers to see and can influence their beliefs about different groups of people.

Because companies like 21st Century Fox and Warner Bros. have power, they "are able to abuse such power and establish the discursive and cognitive hegemony that is necessary for the reproduction of the new racism." (Van Dijk 2000, 37) People of colour, of different religions that the Christian 'norm' are considered 'the other', they do not conform to societal norms and expectations, but "there is no reason why skin colour is more significant than hair colour or the colour of a person's eyes" (Storey 2009, 168) Racism in the media has a long way to go, but television shows like Luke Cage and films such as Moonlight convey that we are heading in the right direction.

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Gendered Spaces – Male & Female Stereotypes

Gender stereotyping for both men and women play a big part in modern society and throughout this essay, I will be looking at the representation of men and in particular, how superheroes are portrayed in the media, and what they tell men in 'normal' society about how they should look.

Looking at SciFi Now magazine and the two specific issues that are issues 99 and 117, the covers show the superheroes Superman and Batman and they are standing central on the cover with muscles on show. In their research article 'Body Projects and the Regulation of Normative Masculinity', McClean, Henwood and Gill state that "over the past decade, there has been a dramatic rise in the visibility of the male body in the media and popular culture" (2005, 38). The constant portrayal of men who look bigger than the average male - because of their toned stomachs and their muscles - put pressure on the men of society to look like them, yet men are embarrassed to look after their bodies because they are seen as vain, and in their research group, McClain, Henwood and Gill found that "being thought vain or narcissistic was clearly something profoundly feared by the vast majority of the men [they] interviewed" (2005, 50) because men seem to think that "health is traditionally a female rather than male concern" (Stibbe 2004, 35) according to Stibbe in his article: 'Health and the Social Construction of Masculinity in Men’s Health Magazine'.

Films and the science fiction genre in general is considered to be a male focused subject, so Ben Affleck as Batman and Henry Cavill as Superman on the cover of SciFi Now magazine are being aimed at a male audience; therefore, it is mainly men who will see their muscly - and most probably, photoshopped - bodies. In Men, Masculinity, and the Media, Steve Craig describes masculinity as "what a culture expects of its men" (Craig 1992, 3) and Norma Pecora goes to state in her essay 'Superman/Superboys/Supermen: The Comic Book Hero as Socializing Agent', that "[superheroes] have been important symbols of 'maleness' in American culture since Superman was introduced in 1939" (Pecora 1992, 61) Now, with
Americanisation, the superhero phenomenon has taken over all media outlets such as cinema, television and magazines. The media - through Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony - have portrayed the ideal man through the image of superheroes to "[present] a particular ideal of masculinity to their readers" (Pecora 1992, 61) and through the images that these magazines use, "the reader’s desires are partially constructed" (Stibbe 2004, 37).

Masculinity has become a big part of society, just like femininity and as Laura Mulvey uses the term 'male gaze' to describe how men look at women, the term 'male gaze' can also be used to describe how men look at men to see how they can achieve the 'right' body and "what is acceptable, desirable, attractive, successful and possible." (Pecora 1992, 62) Superheroes play a big part in the media in modern day society, and it does not look like they will be going anywhere anytime soon, and that means that the pressure upon men to look like these superheroes will also not be going anywhere.

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