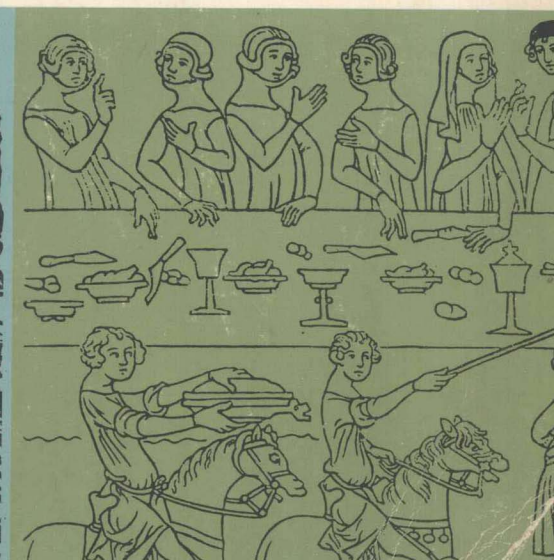


THE HISTORY OF POPULAR CULTURE TO 1815

Edited by NORMAN F. CANTOR
and MICHAEL S. WERTHMAN



The History of ***POPULAR CULTURE***

To 1815

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and Michael S. Werthman

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Introduction

Man's culture is the complex of all he knows, all he possesses, and all he does. His laws and religious beliefs, his art and morals, his customs and ideas are the content of his culture. The dimensions and forms these various elements take determine the nature and quality of a culture. A society whose dominant concern is warfare will be quite different from one in which religious devotion is uppermost in the lives of the people. But cultures differ not only one from the other; every culture is divided into numerous subcultures with patterns of thought and behavior which distinguish the life of the hunter from that of the shopkeeper, the customs of the city dweller from those of the farmer, the manners of the child from those of the adult. And cutting across cultural and subcultural boundaries is the fundamental distinction between work and play: between what is done of necessity and what is done by choice.

George Santayana, writing about the distinctions between work and play, indicated the importance of the things men do when they are not engaged in the fight for survival or in the avoidance of pain. He said:

We may measure the degree of happiness and civilization which any race has attained by the proportion of its energy which is devoted to free and generous pursuits, to the adornment of life and the culture of the imagination. For it is in the spontaneous play of his faculties that man finds himself and his happiness. Slavery is the most degrading condition of which he is capable, and he is as often a slave to the niggardness of the earth and the inclemency of heaven, as to a master or an institution. He is a slave when all his energy is spent in avoiding suffering and

death, when all his action is imposed from without, and no breath or strength is left him for free enjoyment. . . . Work and play here take on a different meaning and become equivalent to servitude and freedom. . . . We no longer mean by work all that is done usefully, but only what is done unwillingly and by the spur of necessity. By play we are designating, no longer what is done fruitlessly, but whatever is done spontaneously and for its own sake, whether it have or not an ulterior utility.

Popular culture may be seen as all those things man does and all those artifacts he creates for their own sake, all that diverts his mind and body from the sad business of life. Popular culture is really what people do when they are not working; it is man in pursuit of pleasure, excitement, beauty, and fulfillment.

This book is an anthology describing and discussing all elements of popular culture from ancient times to 1815. The selections show the relations of the various facets of popular culture with one another and trace the impact of popular culture itself on the whole pattern of social interaction and change. The extracts are drawn from serious studies in social history, from the works of historians, sociologists, and critics whose concern is human behavior and the nature of human society. Each of the four parts covers an historical era whose cultural components distinguish it from all others. The book presents a panorama of the content and quality of popular culture over more than twenty centuries.

This examination of the myriad of human pursuits reveals that no single aspect of popular culture controls or determines the course or composition of all others. No general rule indicating that culture moves from the rich and powerful classes downward to other social groups is evident. Influences seem to move in all directions with varying degrees of force. A preoccupation with military prowess and courage may have been fundamental to the culture of medieval noblemen, but the impress of these elements upon the amusements and diversions of the peasants was minor. Religious fervor, on the other hand, can explode over the entire social spectrum, instilling in men of all classes the desire to use their time and energy in the creation of suitable instruments for the fulfillment of their devotion and inspiring them into acts of high purpose touching their faith. Even the cultural components of social groups whose power and influence in society would seem logically to be strictly limited may be taken up by members of more influential segments of the community or even be incorporated into the popular culture of the general society itself. Thus, in the contemporary era, the subculture of the young has been adopted by the adult population, putting suburban

matrons into miniskirts, getting diplomats to dance to rock and roll bands, and making the jargon of teenagers a source for the rhetoric of academicians. Similarly, the tastes and standards of the very lowest elements of society can find their way eventually into the customs and manners of the very highest status groups. Fashions and attitudes that in one era were to be found only in the house of ill repute filter through the social system, capturing entertainers, socialites, working people, and even the young, who may well have no knowledge of the origins of their behavioral patterns. And so high school girls in the middle of the twentieth century can wear clothes and makeup which in the eighteenth century would have been suitable only for a Fanny Hill.

Changes in popular culture often depend on the exposure of the members of a social group to external influences which shape their taste and behavior. It is obvious, therefore, that as technology has increased the potential of communication, the expansion and enrichment of popular culture has been facilitated. When people play out their lives in limited geographical areas, the possibility of cross-cultural contacts and influences is greatly diminished. Similarly, when the vast majority of humankind are illiterate, the dissemination of cultural information is circumscribed. But printing, railroads, steamships, radio, and television make it easy for people and ideas to move about with great speed and relative facility. This means that in the modern era the forms of popular culture have multiplied enormously, and at the same time the possibility for people of divergent backgrounds to share the same cultural experience has become a reality.

The vastly increased occasions for entertainment provided by mass transportation and mass media and by the provision of money and leisure for more and more people have had the effect not of satiating man's hunger for diversion, but of amplifying it. Man's need and desire for enjoyment, excitement, and beauty seem to be unlimited. The more intense and varied the cultural offerings, the greater his demand for yet more amusement. Participation in leisure activities is equated with the good life, with a man's desire to do with his time and energy what he will. It is in popular culture, in the organized, structured, and institutionalized activities of play, that man learns and practices social interaction in a manner least threatening to his position and well-being. In games and leisure activities he can work out his aggressions, indulge his fantasies, and test his abilities without risking serious scorn or censure. There is a freedom and spontaneity in play not permitted man in his workaday existence. Involvement in and enjoyment of popular culture permit the participant freedom to be himself.

Play is not frivolous; it is a serious matter centering on how men treat one another, a reflection of man's needs, aspirations, and nature.

The rules which regulate the games people play differ from those prescribed for most human activities inasmuch as a man may choose to play or be a spectator or absent himself altogether. These choices are not open in the larger, more public game of life that depends on political and economic compulsion. The quality of volition therefore informs the whole history of popular culture. In that history is described what men have done and are doing with their capabilities, and further, it measures human potentiality not by showing what man can be forced to do, but by demonstrating what he can do when left to his own devices, free to follow the inclinations of his mind and spirit.

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