The Reflections of Popular Culture in Literature

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ABSTRACT

The line between popular culture and established culture is quite shifty. Some arts in fact have popular culture as their theme. The cultural references can interchange between accepted culture and popular culture. Many a critic makes a difference between popular culture and mass culture. The 'mass culture' is used to denote popular culture stuff that has been assumed by marketing interests. Very often a distinction is made between the popular culture and elite culture too. The Elite culture inclines to be culture that has been carried forward to the social norms and that is chosen by the affluent and influential in society. In another way we can define popular culture as a culture created by sub cultural groups in order to find a resolution to a problem. In order to identify the members of the sub culture group members popular cultural materials are used abundantly. Popular culture fiction is promoted as category work. Genre literature is a type of mass and popular culture stuff. Science fiction as a genre has been innovative in introducing characters with non-traditional gender roles, characters of colour, and characters with alternate routines.

Keywords : - Popular culture, Popular Fiction, Commercial Fiction, General Fiction, Science Fiction.

What constitutes popular culture is debated, and the definition that one chooses influences the interpretations one makes about popular culture. Popular culture may be said to be represented by those objects and icons that are recognizable to a large number of people but that have not yet passed into the social canon. When something becomes part of the social canon, it becomes part of the norms, rules, and expectations of the members of a society. For example, one may argue that a famous basketball player is part of popular culture, because he is widely recognized, but that the player is not part of the social canon, because he is not a model of conduct or historical example, as are such figures as Jesus, Martin Luther King, Jr., or a living president. The borders between popular culture and canonical culture are clearly quite fluid, and precise definition is impossible. Some art, in fact, has as its theme the ease with which images and cultural references can shuttle between canonical culture and popular culture.

Many critics make a distinction between popular culture and mass culture. When this distinction is made, "mass culture" is used to describe popular culture materials that have been appropriated by commercial interests. This is often a circular process, with commercial interests producing objects and images that are adopted by groups as cultural icons, which in turn are further exploited by commercial interests. An example is the artist Andy Warhol's using a commercial image, the Campbell's soup can, in his art, and then the art's being printed on shirts, which are sold in large numbers. In another example, sports figures endorse items of clothing, which are in turn used by youth gangs to identify members. An element of popular culture, such as a type of music,

may also be considered part of mass culture, since a commercial interest (a record company) is involved in the music's dissemination.

Another distinction is often made between popular culture and what is called elite or high culture. Such a distinction often says more about the social identification of the person making the distinction than about popular culture or elite culture. Vague boundaries also exist between elite culture and popular culture. The works of British poet Geoffrey Chaucer, for example, may clearly belong to elite culture, and the songs of the rock group Nirvana may clearly belong to the popular culture, but in the wake of popular film versions of her novels, whether the British author Jane Austen belongs to the elite or to the popular culture is hard to determine definitively. Elite culture tends to be culture that has passed into social canon and that is preferred by the rich and powerful in society.

Another definition of popular culture is that culture created by subcultures in the process of solving a problem. Popular culture materials are often used by subcultures as ways of identifying subculture members. It infers an active participation of subculture members in the appropriation, creation, and use of popular culture materials as audience and as artist. Henry Jenkins' *T*extual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture explores this active aspect of cultural product use and production as it affects television fiction. His title is intended to preview the thesis that he presents: that sub-culturally organized television viewers use television media for their own purposes and are not passive consumers.

Most popular culture theorists have examined television and music more than they have examined cultural products that are based on the written word. Unwritten media, it seems, appeal to the theorists because such media are more ephemeral than the written word. Additionally, literacy is an acquired skill, even people who do not speak Chinese can enjoy a Chinese television program by following the action, and can enjoy Chinese music. Consequently, there is more opportunity to study people interacting with such popular culture media as television and music.

Popular culture fiction is marketed as genre literature. Genre literature is accused of being simplistic, sometimes banal, and at its most controversial, of defying social norms. Genre literature is a type of mass and popular culture material. It is studied by popular culture theorists as a branch of literary study. To popular culture theorists, a text is any societal production, therefore any media—books, film, television shows, recordings, radio, and musicare texts. Genre literature consists of written texts.

Genre literature romance novels, science fiction, fantasy, mystery and detective, horror, pornographic books, and Westerns, for example creates a system of expectations for the reader. Genre literature consists of texts with recognizable, conventional themes and plots. In order to reduce financial risk, publishers prefer to reproduce fiction similar to what has successfully sold before. Marketing by genre is one way of reducing the financial risk of publishing. Genre fiction announces to the potential purchaser what to expect from the product. Meeting these expectations can often be crucial to the fiction's success. The set of assumptions of genre fiction also allows the writer to exploit conventions of plot and vocabulary. Readers and writers demand a certain amount of innovation or novelty to be entertained. In genre literature, there can be too much and too little innovation. Genre literature innovation tends to be slow and steady, not taking great leaps, as a result of market forces. The categories of genre fiction can be as fluid as the definition of popular culture; the elements that are necessary to create a science-fiction detective novel, for example, are simply a writer, a

publisher, and a hoped-for reader. When a market for a new genre category is found, a new genre category is created, despite how someone who wishes to create a reliable categorization system may feel about such developments.

According to the Book Industry Study Group's 1990-1991 survey of book purchasing habits, popular fiction is the most purchased subject category of books. Popular or genre fiction marketing categories include: romance, general, mystery and detective, occult, science fiction, espionage or thriller, historical, fantasy, suspense or psychology, Western, male adventure, religious, and adult. The most purchased category by far is romance, with a 46 percent market share in 1990. Romance was followed in 1990 by general fiction, then science fiction, mystery and detective, and occult. More than 50 percent of the households surveyed did not purchase any books in that year. If they were reading fiction at all, it was from magazines or books checked out from the library. Women are by far the largest purchasers of romance fiction and males lead the way slightly in purchasing most other categories of fiction.

Noted African American non-fiction and science-fiction writer Samuel R. Delany, in *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw: Notes on the Language of Science Fiction*, explains that science fiction, as a genre, is distinct from other genres because the reading and writing of science fiction require a much more literal interpretation of the writing than other genres. For example, the sentence "It blew him away" may require quite different interpretations by the reader depending upon whether it is found in a Danielle Steele romance novel or a Robert A. Heinlein science-fiction novel. In the first case, the author would probably be referring to an event having great emotional impact on the character. In the second, the science-fiction novel, the author may very well be saying that a creature of unknown gender propelled

the male character an undetermined distance. Either in spite of or because of this need for literal interpretation, science fiction as a genre has been innovative in introducing characters with non-traditional gender roles, characters of colour, and characters with alternative lifestyles. Another possible reason for science fiction's innovation is its roots in the adventure genre. Much science fiction is about travel to other worlds, which implicitly or explicitly invites the reader to compare this world to the other one. Thus, science fiction is by tradition a way to produce entertaining social criticism.

Published scientific discussion of the psychology of reading and writing—literacy—is abundant but little has been done to examine the uses of texts by the consumer. Notable sociological exceptions include Herbert J. Gans's discussion of the uses of the action-adventure film by lower-class males in his book *The Urban Villagers.*Many of the social factors involved in the production of literacy are simple to recognize. An isolated subsistence economy has little need of literate people and, typically, the people in such an economy have little desire for literacy. The more industrialized a country is, however, the more literate people it will have. Worldwide, literate men outnumber literate women nearly four to one. This fact points out the economic and political uses of literacy, which in turn affect the production of commercial fiction.

Urban areas become literate before rural. The economic elites tend to make better use of institutions where literacy is acquired, such as schools. The poorer economic groups make less use of these institutions and this contributes historically to the gap between literates and illiterates becoming wider over time if left uncorrected by other forces. Democracy, as a governmental form, seems to promote literacy better than dictatorships, and literate people who immigrate to industrialized countries do better economically than illiterate or subliterate people. Literacy is an

important prerequisite to other forms of education and to the development of reading as a leisure activity.

Commerce was the most likely driving force behind the creation of writing systems and the spread of literacy. Industrial employers, for example, know that literate employees are easier to train and seem better able to retain that training. An illiterate person works from concrete, limited examples rather than from abstract concepts acquired through the increased examples a literate person is exposed to by reading. Other factors for the promulgation of literacy include the urge to spread the word of God—some religions, for example Christianity, are based on writing rather than on oral tradition—and to make a society learn to accept innovation, since literate people tend to have tolerance and acceptance for innovation.

In order for people to become literate, literacy has to be valuable to the learner. Writing is more difficult to learn than reading, therefore there have always been more readers than writers. The most important factor in promoting a desire to read in the young child is for the child to see parents reading and to be read to. Factors that appear necessary for literacy to spread within a society include enough leisure and wealth for people to have time to learn. This factor alone does not determine literacy. Additionally, the members of a society must perceive that literacy is useful in their daily lives and as a society feel a need for improvement.

In Europe and North America, the right to vote was originally tied to property ownership. When the voting franchise was extended to literate non-propertied people, the incentive to become literate increased. Further technological advances in the form of inexpensive paper (invented in China), and the printing press (first used in Germany), created the possibility of universal literacy. In the developed areas of the world in the twentieth century, the need for literacy is compelling and self-evident; it is nearly impossible to earn a living, except through crime, without being literate, and in many places' literacy in more than one language is necessary for many forms gainful employment.

The United States of America was founded by people with religious convictions that fostered literacy. The United States is also a nation of immigrants of diverse linguistic backgrounds, and so the formal teaching of language, which includes written language, has long been practiced in the United States. Additionally, the United States is an industrialized nation, in need of educated workers. With these conditions for literacy, fiction had a market in the United States. With that market came the development of genre fiction to target specific groups in that mass market. Fiction is a learning tool just as are non fictional works. Fiction is mass marketed, so publishers tend to publish works that will appeal to the largest target audience. In the United States, that target audience has been, primarily, middle-class to upper-class white households, and the majority of fiction published has characters representing that market.

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