

Pop culture no danger, makes life pleasant

(EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the second of 15 articles on popular culture in American life. The series is the text for an Oakland University course led by Prof. Jesse Pitts, whose own comments are elsewhere in today's edition. The series was written for Courses by Newspaper, a program of the University of California, San Diego. The views are the writers'.)

By HERBERT J. GANS

Every society has its story-tellers, who look at life through imagination, colored glasses, to entertain, inform, question and reassure their audiences.

In the past, they created folk tales, folk art and folk music. Today, they write movie or television scripts and novels, create commercial art and compose popular ballads and "rock," and their product is called popular culture.

Together with the businessmen and women for whom they work, they are the makers of popular culture.

Although names such as Paddy Chayevsky, Harold Robbins and Norman Lear are well-known, story-tellers are largely anonymous. We know "the Fonz" but not the writers who created the character and put words in his mouth.

Most story-tellers are white, middle-aged males, although some women are now breaking down the sex barriers. Most story-tellers are also well-educated, and some do not personally care for the popular culture they create, but they are also professionals who aim to please the audience.

THEN, TOO popular culture is a group effort. An individual writer's work is frequently rewritten by others, including story-tellers, who make it conform to what they think the audience will buy.

In doing this, they are acting as so-called "gatekeepers." The telephone, movie and publishing executives decide what enters and leaves the "gates" of their firms, along with the bankers and advertisers who provide some of the funds for marketing popular culture. The most intriguing puzzle about the popular-culture makers is what they do for and to the audience—how popular culture affects society.

One theory sees the popular-culture makers as passive agents who give the audience what it wants. The other theory views them as active shapers of the tastes of their audiences.

Spontaneous folk culture is rare

By JESSE PITTS
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Last week we examined the functions of popular culture—symbolization of group membership, reinforcement of norms and values, information and entertainment. We saw the importance of "ceremonial valence" and of "organizational authority" in permitting the discharge of these functions, including the fact that ceremonial valence implies a certain automatic "organizational authority." We touched upon the dual role of news as information and entertainment.

This week I shall begin the first of a three-part series which will try to distinguish, within popular culture, between its spontaneous, sponsored and fabricated components.

SPONTANEOUS popular culture is that set of beliefs and entertainment patterns which owes little to present sponsorship by the upper classes or to the mass media.

There used to be a romantic conception of popular culture as being a spontaneous emanation of the masses. It bore the name of "folk culture" and was supposed to reflect its native wisdom and natural goodness.

However, when we look more closely, we notice it has its share of gore and pornography. (French Canadian radio finds it very liberating to have female singers render off-color folk songs.)

Many artifacts of popular culture are "trickle-down" effects of high culture, such as the reproductions of "Whistler's Mother" we often find in homes in mining towns. Barn dancing is actually a popularization of the country minuet, German farm girls used to sing Schubert lieder without realizing they were once sung by society girls in their mothers' salons, in front of eligible and (hopefully) polite bachelors.

That is why I stressed that spontaneous popular culture owed little to present sponsors, although much to a sediment of past sponsorship and past mass media productions.

IT IS A COMPLEX which has its own laws of development and upon which sponsored and fabricated items will have only partly predictable impact.

One reason for unpredictability is that we do not know very much about the laws which govern the development of popular culture and, often enough, we do not know very much about the present state of popular culture.

We try to find out the elements of its belief system—what we know as public opinion—through surveys. The problem there is that survey methods are expensive and yet very crude. A good example of spontaneous popular culture, in its opinion dimension, was GI culture during World War II. This GI culture concerned itself with many items such as the quality of U.S. generals or the highjinx of Carmen



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THE "PASSIVE" theory holds that popular-culture makers only spell out what is already in people's minds, so that popular culture is actually a mirror that reflects American society and its people. Not only their wants, but also their secret fears and wishes—for example, to be heroic or bionic supermen and superwomen.

But an audience in the tens of millions is so varied in age, income and education—and thus in its wants and wishes—that popular culture cannot possibly be a mirror for everyone.

Nor does it even try. Being a commercial product, popular culture is aimed at specific audiences. Many television programs are made for the age 18-49, middle-class viewers, especially women, whom sponsors most want to reach; movies are generally intended for the 12-29 age group because movie attendance drops off sharply in middle age.

But even more to the point, the audience may not even have strong wants or fears for which it needs a mirror. People use popular culture mainly for entertainment and diversion, and most do not take it very

seriously. Moviegoers flock to "Jaws," I believe, for the chase scenes and the suspense, not because they needed to deal with their fears about Nature Rampant.

THE "ACTIVE" theory, in one version, maintains that the popular-culture makers are also America's taste-makers; that in creating popular culture, they also create our tastes and "tastes" of the audience.

No doubt they help to shape some

tastes, for the miniskirt became popular after actresses wore it in films and television programs.

But values must exist independently before they can appear in the mass media. For example, many Americans believed in the devil before Hollywood made "The Exorcist," and they became more liberal in their sexual attitudes before the mass media were allowed to be franker.

The popular-culture makers may propose new tastes or ideas, but the audience disposes. Only a tiny fraction of the hundreds of popular songs recorded every year find favor with listeners; and these days, most new television programs are cancelled before the season is over.

Therefore, popular-culture makers do not try to create or alter tastes. Instead, they appeal to already existing tastes.

More often than not, they only add novel touches to old formulas, standard story plots and familiar heroes and villains, some of which have been popular since the days of folk culture.

Indeed, story-tellers and sellers proceed by guesswork, for while they know what the audience has liked previously, they cannot predict what it will like next. They are better described as nervous guessers about, rather than powerful manipulators of, the audience's taste.

And well they might be nervous. They may be soon out of business if they guess incorrectly.

ANOTHER "ACTIVE" theory argues that the popular-culture makers, being in business, will do anything to make a profit.

They therefore appeal to the audience's basest motives—or what is called "the 12-year-old mentality" in television. The result is a popular culture that is shallow or emotionally harmful to people.

"Charlie's Angels" and even "Uptight, Downstairs" may appear superficial, the exceedingly well-educated partisans of high culture, those cultural experts who believe that almost everything save Shakespeare, Bach and Rembrandt is trash.

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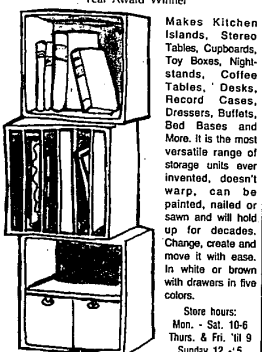
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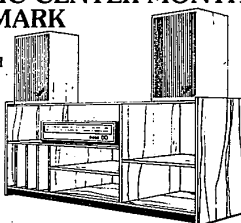
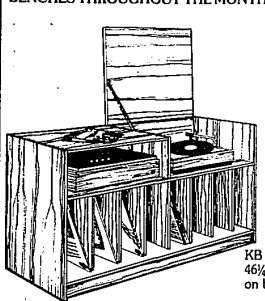


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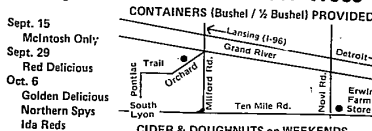
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