

Pastoral Concerns about Pop Culture

I. Background on Pop Culture

- Pop culture is a recent phenomenon: prior to the mid-20th c., high culture and folk culture dominated.
- But the 1960s saw the new dominance of pop culture: mass-marketed entertainment with a massive appeal.

II. Concerns

Pop culture is not inherently sinful, but it generates unique challenges. Here are some of my concerns as a pastor:

1. Pop culture tends to value feelings more than truth; it promotes unending childhood and immaturity
 - a. "I like how this song makes me feel; therefore it's good."
 - b. The problem of sentimentality:
 - i. "Art may be simple, but it should never be shallow" (quoted by J. Smith)
 - ii. The Hagia Sophia vs. the Precious Moments Chapel
 - c. Abraham Kuyper: "If you confess that the world was once beautiful, but by the curse has come undone, then art has the mystical task of reminding us of the beauty that was lost and anticipating its coming luster.... In this cold, irreligious and practical age, art has kept many alive to the higher aspirations of our soul."
 - d. Cultural forms have meaning based on context: consider Christian heavy metal, Christian soap opera, and nice dates at Burger King.
 - e. If a song makes you feel happy, but its lyrics are false or childish, would you stop listening?
2. Pop culture promotes worldly values, a worldly sense of the beautiful and good life.
 - a. Exod 23:2: "You shall not follow the masses in doing evil"
 - b. The problem of pop culture is not that it is escapist; it is that it's not escapist enough (Tolkien). Tolkien's literature offered escape from "illusion, from a secularist dream world that has lost the distinction between good and evil" (Clowney).
 - c. What does every beer commercial tout? What really matters is looking attractive and being with attractive people, having fun and being macho.
 - d. Pop culture "leaves our feelings essentially unchanged ... It neither transforms nor fulfills our desires but only reminds us of them." (Kaplan)
3. Pop culture encourages laziness and impatience; it lacks excellence and richness
 - a. It "specializes in instant gratification"; it says, "nothing worthwhile is beyond your reach right now." (Ken Myers)
 - b. Cheap amusement: pop culture tends to forget the urgency of this present age; it leads to "amusing ourselves to death" (Neil Postman)
 - c. Pop culture cannot bear sustained, deep attention. The more time and attention you put in, the less you get out. (Myers)
 - d. High and folk culture requires some effort to enjoy. What about: "I'm so tired after work, I just wanna watch TV"?
 - e. C. S. Lewis: "Aim at Heaven and you will get Earth 'thrown in': aim at Earth and you will get neither."

4. Pop culture is really an *anti*-culture; it is transitory, disdainful of the past.
 - a. True culture says, “Let this be recorded for a generation to come, so that a people yet to be created may praise the LORD” (Ps 102:18)
 - b. Vs. pop culture: it is not likely that anyone will say, “I bequeath to my kids my Spice Girls CDs.” (Doug Wilson)
 - c. Does it give you pause that most of the modern church hates old music?
 - d. Pop culture is *used* and then disposed of (consumerism); high and folk culture are *received*, and then passed on with improvements (tradition).
 - e. Are you seeking to build a treasure trove of the good, the true, and beautiful that you can pass on to the next generation? Or is it all about your pleasure at this moment?

III. Challenges and clarifications

- Christians can enjoy pop culture, “as long as you are not dominated by the sensibility of popular culture, as long as you are not captivated by its idols.” (Myers)
- High culture and folk culture can be just as bad as pop culture.
- If you’re a pop culture junkie, what is motivating this?
- Changing our tastes requires effort, patience, and time.

Evaluating What to Watch, Read, or Listen To

I. Warnings

Beware when ...

1. You find that a work (of art, music, movie, etc.) is encouraging you to love what is evil; when it is celebrating what God hates.
2. It is becoming addictive: it is taking over your life, and you can’t imagine life without it.
3. Your motive is to fit in with the people around you, especially people who do not follow Christ.
4. The person you are with is likely stumble if they watch it with you.
5. It’s a rapid waste of your time, when there are so many better things to do.

II. Encouragements

1. Be discerning about what you watch or listen to! Think about the subtle messages (who is the “good guy” and “bad guy”; what are the desires it inculcates).
2. Don’t settle for less! In all your seeking, seek God. Strive to know his divine glory better through your enjoyment of the arts.

Rom 12:2: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”