

# Popular Culture and the Early Modern Stage

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## Abstract

Popular culture during the early modern era brought many changes to the world as it was then known. While political and social events have shaped the course of history, popular culture has played a key role in the lives of ordinary people. Religion, music, literature, and theatre were central parts of their daily lives, providing them with forms of expression, entertainment, and identity. The phenomenon of popular culture was significant because people played a key role in the social changes that the population of that time needed. People were discovering a better life for themselves, and popular culture was trying to break down the social orders and hierarchies that were so clearly visible because of the characteristics of folk culture and high culture. People no longer wanted classes and hierarchies – the traditional culture, which at that time was strongly established, was under attack. There was no longer the pursuit of perfection and the expression of beauty, culture was seen as subject to personal preferences and definitions of it, but most of all as subject to one's own identity. Traditional culture still had its place in society, as did high culture, but people's aspirations and desires changed. This thesis examines popular culture and its manifestations as well as historical changes that popular culture had undergone up to the start of the early modern era.

**Keywords:** popular culture, early modern period, forms of popular culture

## Sažetak

Popularna kultura tijekom ranog novog vijeka donijela je mnoge promjene. Dok su politički i društveni događaji oblikovali tijek povijesti, popularna kultura igrala je ključnu ulogu u životima običnih ljudi. Religija, glazba, književnost i kazalište bili su središnji dijelovi svakodnevnog života, pružajući različite oblike izražavanja, zabave i identiteta. Fenomen popularne kulture bio je značajan jer su ljudi odigrali ključnu ulogu u društvenim promjenama. Ljudi su otkrivali bolji život za sebe, a popularna kultura pokušala je srušiti društvene poretke i hijerarhije koje su tada bile tako jasno vidljive zbog obilježja narodne i visoke kulture. Ljudi više nisu željeli klase i hijerarhije – na udaru je bila tradicionalna kultura koja je u to vrijeme imala izrazito jaku hijerarhiju. Više nije bilo težnje za savršenstvom i izražavanjem ljepote, kultura se doživljavala podložnom osobnim preferencijama i definicijama o njoj, ali prije svega podložnom vlastitom identitetu. Tradicionalna kultura i dalje je imala svoje mjesto u društvu, kao i visoka kultura, ali su se ljudske težnje i želje promijenile. Ovaj završni rad istražuje popularnu kulturu i njezine manifestacije kao i povijesne promjene kroz koje je popularna kultura prošla sve do ranog novog vijeka.

**Ključne riječi:** popularna kultura, rani novi vijek, oblici popularne kulture

## 1. Introduction

Popular culture is a dynamic and multifaceted aspect of societal expression, encompassing both unity and variety across different contexts, and historical periods. This thesis undertakes a comprehensive exploration of the origins, transmission, changes, and distinctive features of popular culture, offering insights into its evolution and impact on societal identity.

Beginning with an investigation of its origins in villages, towns, and the countryside, this thesis explores how diverse regional, and religious variations shaped local identities. It analyses the transmission of popular culture through professionals and amateurs, examining the mechanisms by which cultural practices disseminate and evolve within society.

This thesis deals with pivotal phases of change, including the Reform periods from 1500 to 1650, and 1650 to 1800. It also takes into consideration recent developments in popular culture, highlighting its continuous evolution in response to contemporary influences and global dynamics.

Furthermore, this thesis researches key features of popular culture, including its emergence among people, its role as a spectacle, emotional resonance, progressiveness, and its departure from traditional norms. It explores the intricate relationship between popular culture, folk, and mass culture, elucidating their interplay and mutual influences.

Through the analysis of various forms of popular culture in the early modern stage, such as theatre art, and visual art, this thesis uncovers their contributions to societal identity and values. Finally, this thesis concludes by synthesizing these insights, emphasizing the enduring significance of popular culture in shaping collective identities.

## 2. Origins of popular culture

In the eighteenth century, traditional culture began to die out, and popular culture emerged. This is the period when European intellectuals began to take interest in the people: “It was in the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries, when traditional popular culture was just beginning to disappear, that the 'people' or the 'folk' became a subject of interest to European intellectuals” (Burke, 1978; pg. 3). At that period Johan Gottfried von Herder gave that name to the collection of songs he made in 1774 and 1778. It came from the German word 'folk', which means people. However, popular culture was not accepted with enthusiasm. For two centuries 'most of the attention paid to inexorable evolution of mass culture was negative – in the defensive reaction of those self-appointed protectors of elite and (to a lesser extent) folk culture who have viewed the rise of popular culture as nothing less than an assault upon the edifice of civilization' (Hall, 1983; pg.16). That is why it took some time for it to become widely accepted.

During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it was common to translate, and edit the popular poetry of the modern Greeks, and compare it to rivers and mountains: “The popular ballad...is rescued from the hands of the vulgar to obtain a place in the collection of the man of taste” (Knox, 1779; essay 47). The discovery of popular culture was just a part of the movement of cultural primitivism in which the popular, the distant, and the ancient were all equated. It is also a reaction against the Enlightenment, for which Voltaire is the most significant figure. The Enlightenment is against popular culture's rejection of tradition, its stress on reason, and its elitism. Voltaire praised tradition above reason, and the attraction of folktales was in the supernatural. Also, European intellectuals had good literary and political reason to discover popular culture in that period: “To a considerable extent the discovery of popular culture was a series of 'nativistic' movements in the sense of organised attempts by societies which were under foreign domination to revive their traditional culture. Folksongs could evoke a sense of solidarity in a dispersed population which lacked traditional institutions” (Burke, 1978; pg. 12). All of this presented a challenge for the rulers to discover the underlying order within the apparent disorder, and that is one of the reasons why intellectuals had political reasons to discover popular culture, so that they could more easily manage the masses.



The increasing fear of erasure of cultures prompted the need to record it before it disappeared. Same can be seen in the writing of the Italians during the reign of Napoleon. There is a parallel to the current concerns of the disappearance of tribal societies. It is important to describe a culture in order to remind everyone who will read these descriptions that culture is changing and that some cultures die out.

Even before the Industrial Revolution, the growth of towns, the improvement of the roads, and the spread of literacy were undermining traditional popular culture. That caused social changes that made inventors even more aware of the importance of tradition. For example, Louis Daugerre, who invented the camera, and made it possible for cultural customs to be permanently recorded in a faster way than painting was.

There are also obvious changes that were made in the case of folk music. Music was supposed to be written down because there was no other way of preserving it. The intention was to attract the numerous middle-class audiences with songs by contemporary composers like Schubert and Schumann. Besides music, some festivals survived from medieval to early modern times, or even longer like the Carnival of Cologne, the Carnival of Nuremberg, or the Carnival of Nice.

Despite all of that, there are some questions to be asked: Whose culture is popular culture? Who are the people? Usually, they are defined as everyone in a particular country. On the other hand, for researchers of popular culture, peasants were the most interesting because “they lived close to nature and they were less tainted by foreign ways and preserved primitive customs longer than anyone else” (Burke, 1978; pg. 22). This thesis also describes their influence and way of life in popular culture.

### 3. Features of popular culture

Many questions arise that are associated with popular culture, and critics, and researchers are most often concerned with questions about its origin, appearance, pronunciation, and similar issues. Popular culture's appearance also raises the question of whether a culture is created by the people, or by dominant elitist structures to achieve their own material and ideological goals.

#### 3.1 The emergence of popular culture among people

The term 'popular culture' implies that it is made by people for the people. Determining the roots of each phenomenon in popular culture is a challenge because it is unclear whether it is the result of popular creativity, or imposed by political or financial institutions or any other organization that has the power to achieve its goals. However, one fact is undeniable: in popular culture, the individual is not purely a passive consumer. On the contrary, popular culture provides them a chance to become active creators, creating new popular forms of expression and allowing them to choose for themselves what they will or will not consume (Kellner, 2008; pg. 62). In other words, the consumer is not just a passive follower of trends imposed by organizations. He is also a critic, and a creator who makes decisions following his own interests and goals. It represents an ideal that popular culture strives towards, although it is not necessarily applicable to all individuals.

#### 3.2 The spectacle of popular culture

The main motives for the widespread consumption of popular culture lie in its spectacle, and the ability to provide pleasure. This pleasure comes from consuming content that depicts situations or experiences that people want to experience or emotionally connect with. For example, watching a movie with a happy ending can make a viewer feel as if he or she were part of the event and enjoy the idea that good always triumphs. In such films, negative emotions experienced in real life – like anger,

passivity, boredom and disconnect – are replaced with excitement, dynamism, happiness, and the hope of achieving dreams. This implies that popular culture frequently encourages hedonism.

Many creators in the realm of popular culture aspire to produce captivating spectacles, a pervasive aspect that permeates various forms of media like music, marketing, and films, influencing audiences continuously. This phenomenon heavily relies on visual representation, tying its essence to the way it is presented across different media platforms. Often referred to as a 'media spectacle', each occurrence necessitates mediation through some form of media (Kellner, 2008; pg. 62). Through creating extraordinary and fantastical experiences that provide an escape from reality, creators exert a profound influence. Nevertheless, passive consumption of these spectacles may gradually alienate individuals from their own creativity and reduce their engagement in other aspects of life.

### 3.3 Emotional strength, progressiveness and break with the tradition

It has always been important for people to be emotionally strong. Danesi (2007, pg. 266) believes that when it comes to popular culture, everything revolves around emotional power. Popular culture is widely accepted and consumed because of its expressed emotional appeal, which includes the emotional connection of society and individuals with films and music. Studies of soap opera ratings have shown that people watch soap operas precisely because of the emotional component, which is the feeling of connection with characters who are emotionally close to them. Also, producers of popular culture often use nostalgia as a means of influence. Nostalgia is particularly associated with certain songs, lyrics, melodies, and performers that take people back to defined periods of their lives, usually to their youth.

Progressiveness stands as a pivotal characteristic within popular culture, mirroring societal advancements. As society progresses, popular culture evolves in tandem: "Expressions and idioms within popular culture undergo continual change" (Fiske, 2001; pg. 73). A prime example illustrating this evolution lies in technological advancements, such as 3D technology and innovative visual and auditory effects, revolutionizing the movie-watching experience. Technological advancements also

impact language, spawning new expressions and adaptations tailored for communication mediums like the Internet and text messaging. According to Fiske (2001, pg. 73) this evolution leads to the proliferation of numerous new words, phrases, and abbreviations utilized daily in online communication, catering to the need for rapid exchange of ideas. This also confirmed by the fact that today we all use abbreviations when exchanging messages, especially in informal communications with our peers.

One of the characteristics of popular culture is the break with traditional customs and values, and the rejection of 'high culture' and the cultural patterns established by the elders. Popular culture, usually shaped by the younger generation, challenges traditional and cultural norms, making it extremely attractive. As opposed to high culture, it is accessible to a wide range of people, it provides an opportunity for 'ordinary' people to participate in it, whether by consuming popular culture or by creating it. Fiske (2001, pg. 73) points out that social conflict has become another characteristic of popular culture because it resists established norms, customs, and cultural and social patterns and provokes resistance to tradition.

#### 4. Relationship between popular culture and folk and mass culture

Significant turning points in the study and valuation of popular culture occurred between 1920 and 1930: “This period was marked by the mass production and consumption of culture, the rise of fascism, and the integration of liberal democracies into Western societies. The emergence of cinema and radio also played a crucial role in the spread of popular culture” (Strinati, 2005; pg. 93). Thus, popular culture was increasingly accessible to everyone.

It is crucial to acknowledge that the widespread reproducibility of cultural products through industrial techniques has presented a substantial challenge to conventional notions concerning the role of culture and the arts in society. Furthermore, the films shown in cinemas were not considered authentic, and genuine works of art, nor were they associated with folk culture because they did not originate from the folk heritage.

In addition to the popular press, cinema and radio were among the first modern mass media to emerge in this period. These media raised concerns about the commercialization of culture, and raised questions about political regimes, especially fascist ones, which had the potential for utilizing mass propaganda through these media. Radio and film media enabled centralized control and the spread of the ideology of the fascist state to the wider population (Strinati, 2005, pg. 93). The theory of mass society posits that the Industrial Revolution and urbanization had detrimental effects, destabilizing societies and eroding the cohesive values that once unified people.

According to Strinati (2005; pg. 93), during this era, there was a notable expansion of large-scale industrial facilities and bustling urban centres, which purportedly disrupted the societal fabric, and values that previously bound communities together. Certain scholars argue that popular, mass, and folk culture, despite often being lumped together, actually exhibit significant distinctions. Mass culture is depicted as cultural output overseen by political figures, financiers, and their interest groups, aimed at diverting consumers from genuine needs, and shaping them into a standardized mould, diminishing individuality. Those in positions of power employ mass media to

create and disseminate cultural products aligning with their agendas. According to Fiske (2001; pg. 236), within mass culture, consumers tend to assimilate into the collective, becoming less critical and more accepting of imposed ideals or experiences, potentially leading to passivity. Mass culture typically employs manipulative tactics orchestrated from the top down, utilizing organized control mechanisms to dictate what is deemed desirable or undesirable, normal or abnormal. This stands in contrast to popular culture, which often emerges from grassroots communities or individuals, and evolves organically based on their interests and preferences. Popular culture generally evades the same level of manipulation and control observed in mass culture. Folk culture, on the other hand, is positioned in opposition to mass culture. It can be characterized as a culture originating from and shaped by the people themselves, independent of high culture influences. While the terms 'folk culture' and 'popular culture' may overlap in some aspects, there is a notable disparity between the two. Unlike popular culture, folk culture arises from a relatively stable, traditional social order where social differences do not typically spark conflict. Thus, it is defined by social consensus rather than confrontation.

Another fundamental feature of popular culture is precisely the conflict as a resistance to imposed dominant meanings and values. Popular culture, unlike folk culture is impermanent and transient. Various sources also agree that folk culture characterizes pre-industrial societies, while popular culture is a hallmark of post-industrial societies. Folk culture represents a more straightforward way of life, which is generally conservative, self-sufficient, and often characteristic of rural life. Radical innovation is generally discouraged. Members of the group are expected to adapt to the traditional ways of behaviour adopted by the community. Folk culture is locally oriented and non-commercial.

Traditional culture promises stability, while popular culture often seeks new or fresh elements. For this reason, popular culture often causes changes in folk culture. On the other hand, folk culture rarely enters the realm of popular culture. There are cases when specified elements of folk culture, such as Turkish rugs, Mexican blankets, and Irish fairy tales, appear in the world of popular culture. Generally, when folk culture adapts and commercializes objects, those objects gradually lose their original form (Strinati, 2005, pg. 106). Popular culture is usually different from folk and high culture. In some ways, folk culture shares similarities with popular culture because it involves

mass participation. However, folk culture is based on traditional practices, and is less susceptible to change compared to the more dynamic popular culture.

An essential feature of popular culture is its accessibility to the masses, as it reflects the culture of the everyday. On the other hand, high culture is not mass and is not intended for mass consumption. It belongs to the social elite, and arts like painting, opera, theatre, and intellectual thought are associated with higher socioeconomic strata.

The subjects of high culture often require deep understanding, education, or intellectual effort to be appreciated. Such objects rarely become part of popular culture. Because of this, popular culture is often considered shallow compared to the complexity of high culture. It is important to say that it does not mean that the members of the social elite are not participating in popular culture, or that ordinary people cannot appreciate high culture.

## 5. Unity and variety in popular culture

Not all social classes have always had the same interests, nor were the same things equally accessible to them. In popular culture, however, there were certain elements common to all classes, but also some differences: “In towns, at time of festivals rich and poor, nobles and commoners attended the same sermons” (Burke, 1978; pg. 24). For example, clowns were very popular at the time, so it was not unusual for clowns who were popular in taverns to also perform at the court. For example: “Richard Tarleton's clowning was much appreciated by Queen Elizabeth, who 'bade them take away the knave' for making her laugh so excessively” (Burke, 1978; pg. 26). The Queen was not the only one who enjoyed their performances, but also foreigners and visitors: 'Ivan the Terrible was in England as visitor and he was very fond of jesters and dwarfs, men and women that tumble before him and sing many songs after the russe manner' (Burke, 1978; pg. 26). Also, he often listened to the blind man who told folktales before he went to sleep. This shows unity in the popular culture and equal access to the same things for all social classes.

Be that as it may, we have to take into consideration that nobility and clergy did not listen to folksongs or read chapbooks in the same way or for the same reasons as the craftsmen and peasants did. When members of the elite read chapbooks, they might have taken an interest in folklore, like some intellectuals today. This is certainly possible, and by the eighteenth century the majority were the ones who were under the impact of popular culture, while the minority had access to the great tradition but participated minimally in it, as a second culture. However, educated people did not yet associate ballads, chapbooks and festivals with common people because they participated in these forms of culture.

Popular culture was interesting because about 90 percent of popular culture was represented by peasants. Some of them lived in villages, some in towns, as was the case in Italy, or in isolated homesteads in Norway. Some peasants were poorer than others, and there was a difference between them. “Now to say that poorer peasants were culturally deprived is not to say that they had an alternative culture (poorer peasants did not have access to culture to such an extent, and that does not mean that they had an alternative culture); they may have aspirated to that of the peasant



aristocrats” (Burke, 1978; pg. 31). Also, their culture was different, depending on the place that they came from (Burke, 1978; pg. 31):

If culture grows out of total way of life, one might expect peasant culture to vary according to ecological differences as well as social ones; differences in physical environment involve differences in material culture and encourage differences in attitudes as well. The most obvious illustration of this point is surely contrast between the culture of the mountains and the culture of plains.

The abovementioned divisions will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapters.

## 5.1 Villages

When we talk about differences by place, it is most often a city-village categorization. However, villages also have their differences: “In villages, scholars considered that there is a difference between lowlanders and highlanders, but that was more plausible, because of the hostility of lowlanders to highlanders and the differences between the two cultures” (Blickle, esp, pp 37; Franz, 1963; 73). There were some differences and similarities between these cultures, between farmers and herdsmen, and above all shepherds. Shepherd culture was distinct and different from the peasant culture, symbolized by unique clothing like smocks. They might come from farming villages, but they could not live there for a long time because they had to migrate with their flocks. Their way of life was an inspiration for pastoral poetry in which it was idealized because they had time on their hands that they could spend in different ways. For example, “they could make music playing big pipe, made of skin of a goat or a sheep” (Burke, 1978; pg. 33), or they could play a flute, slowly and sadly if sheep were lost, but also very cheerfully when sheep were found again. Their working life was very lonely and because of that they developed an elaborate set of “festivities at least in central Europe so they had their own guilds and fraternities, own saints like Saint Wendelin” (Burke, 1978; pg. 33) or Saint Wolfgang. It was not unusual for shepherds to be married to each other (shepherds’ daughters to shepherds), as in Hanover in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They were very proud and very often were rejected by the rest of the society because of that. It was not so rare for farmers to

accuse them of being lazy and dishonest, especially in Germany, where their guilds regarded their sons as 'uneherlich' which means 'without honour'.

## 5.2 Towns

In towns, unlike in villages, every day was a festival. In large towns, ballad singers and clowns performed all the time, whereas in villages they were rarely seen. The guild system played a crucial role in establishing a distinct culture for craftsmen and shopkeepers, setting them apart from the peasant class. Guilds developed their own traditions and rituals, celebrated patron saints, and organized both the professional and recreational aspects of their members' lives. This unique cultural framework fostered a strong sense of community and identity among guild members: "Every craft has its own culture in the sense of its own skills, handed down from generation to generation, but some of them seem to have had a culture of their own in wider and fuller sense" (Burke, 1978; pg. 36). This indicates that the documentation of these cultures includes both self-descriptions by members of specific crafts, and external observations about them. For example, carpenters were known to wear leather aprons and carry rulers as part of their trade. A tailor would dress stylishly, with a needle and thread inserted in his coat.

## 5.3 Other variations

In addition to village-town differences, there were various differences depending on the region from which people came, as well as religious differences, and differences based on sex. Except for Christians, there were also Jewish and Muslim communities, particularly in towns of southern Spain and Eastern Europe. Each group possessed unique customs and beliefs. In Spain, the Jewish population had their own traditional songs, performers, and theatrical productions, such as Esther plays documented in the sixteenth century. They drew inspiration from the surrounding cultural milieu but adapted these influences to fit their own traditions by removing any Christian references. Similarly, despite facing forced conversion to Christianity following the fall

of Granada to Christian forces in 1492, the Muslim community in Spain managed to maintain their cultural identity throughout the sixteenth century.

The lack of evidence regarding women has posed a significant challenge for historians of popular culture, a challenge often referred to as the 'problem of women.' Reconstructing and interpreting the culture of women, who were frequently voiceless in historical records, presents a particularly acute difficulty. Women's culture can be seen as a subset of popular culture within the broader cultural context, making it easier to define what it isn't rather than what it is. Their cultural experiences differed markedly from those of their male relatives—fathers, brothers, husbands, and sons—due to their exclusion from various societal spheres. Women were typically excluded from participation in guilds, fraternities, and even public spaces such as taverns.

There are also variations in culture between farmers and shepherds, miners and sailors, but that did not mean a lot to their wives. At least, women in eastern Europe had their own songs. A compilation of folk songs from Galicia categorizes 'women's songs' primarily as love songs, and 'men's songs' predominantly as ballads. There were differences not only in religious rituals, or way of life in regard to gender, but also in the way of building. For example, "Italians built in stone, Dutchmen in brick and Russians in wood. The English and Scottish border ballads reflect the way of life of a frontier community, with its stress on cattle and kin raiding and feuding" (Burke, 1978; pg. 51), so there were differences in building material as well.

#### 5.4 Countryside

There existed a multitude of popular cultures or various forms of popular culture, yet distinguishing between them poses a challenge due to the fluidity of cultural boundaries. The term 'popular culture', often used in historical contexts, typically referred to the culture of the most visible demographic—young adult males (YAMs). However, this group did not represent the entire population any more accurately than white Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASPs) do in the USA. Those studying popular culture refer to the peasants as the 'people'. Culture is deeply rooted in the overall way of life, and peasants did not adhere to a uniform lifestyle; some lived in villages, others

in towns, as in southern Italy, and some in isolated homesteads, such as those in Norway.

Their communities were socially diverse, comprising both free individuals and serfs. Across the region east of the Elbe River, the rural population underwent serfdom during the 16th and early 17th centuries, leading to a complex social structure with numerous class distinctions. Class divisions were notably evident in lifestyle, particularly concerning property ownership. In various parts of Europe, discrepancies existed between peasants who owned land, and employed labourers, and those who relied solely on their labour for survival. This social stratification was more pronounced in less developed regions. Despite these differences, it is important not to overlook the significance of these traditional communities, as Burke argued (1978).

## 6. The transmission of popular culture

Every person, from craftsmen and peasants to their mothers, wives, and children, participated in the transmission of popular culture. They passed it on whenever they told a traditional story to someone else. Pre-industrial society was organized on a handmade, do-it-yourself basis to a level that is difficult to imagine today. For example, shepherds made their own bagpipes, men of the household made the furniture, and women made the clothes, mostly during the winter. There were no hospitals, so anyone who fell ill or was injured was treated at home.

### 6.1 Professionals and amateurs

It is a problem to define who the professional artists were. The most appropriate definition would seem to be someone who works mainly for a group of craftsmen and peasants. One notable figure is the eighteenth-century English caricaturist, James Gillray. However, many of his contemporaries remain relatively obscure, with only their names remembered. Some artisans of the eighteenth century, including painters, carvers, and weavers, were undoubtedly skilled professionals. Some may have pursued other occupations before becoming artists, and they might have owned farms to supplement their income. Many of these artisans worked in the homes of their clients, and their training was often informal. Painters honed their craft by emulating or adapting Dutch or German woodcuts or engravings, frequently passing down their skills to their children. In towns, the situation was different. "In large towns there was a living made by specialist painters, like sign-painters in London, who clustered in Harp Allery, or madonneri, painters of votive pictures to the Madonna, in Venice or Naples" (Burke, 1978; pg. 93). Some painters travelled to the countryside in search of work, seeking to paint portraits or signs. In some regions, such as the Italian Marches, there were entire villages of semi-professional potters. Also, there were performers: "Their successors of the medieval minstrels were a motley and versatile group" (Salmen, 1960; pg. 96). The entertainment industry of the time encompassed a wide range of performers, including clowns, comedians, charlatans, buffoons, fencers, ballad singers, fools, jugglers, and more. Many of these individuals were versatile, often fulfilling multiple roles simultaneously, leading to overlapping titles. These professionals were adept at putting on diverse shows, with performers capable of

playing instruments, acting, jesting, and engaging in various other activities. They had to excel in mimicry and quick-change acts to keep the audience entertained. English troupes found success on continental tours because their performances transcended language barriers, relying more on their overall effect rather than specific verbal communication.

Most of these performers spent their lives on the move, because it was way easier to change the audience rather than the repertoire. These people, just like nomads, did not enjoy good reputation with more sedentary people. This led to sons of players being named 'lucking in honour', rendering them ineligible for guild membership, similar to the sons of executioners and gravediggers.

Apart from professionals, there were also amateurs, semi-professionals, and part-time specialists who had other occupations but earned supplementary income from their singing, playing, or healing. We do not know much about them, and what we do know comes from times they were organized into societies or drew the attention of the upper classes or authorities for some reason. Usually, this was because they were outstanding performers, or suspected of engaging in activities such as witchcraft, seduction, or heresy.

## 7.Changes in popular culture

### 7.1. The first phase of the reform: 1500 – 1650

Victorians used to say that the reform of popular culture was about to change the attitudes and values of the rest of the population, or to improve them. Self-improvement was actively pursued, challenging the notion that craftsmen and peasants were merely passive recipients of reform. Nevertheless, the leading role in this was played by the clergy: “Despite that, the leadership of the movement was in the hands of the most educated, and at that time that was usually clergy” (Davis, 1974; pg. 309). This is not surprising, because even in the Middle Ages, priests were the most educated, had their own schools and rewrote books.

The movement had both positive and negative aspects. On the negative side, there was an effort to suppress or purify many elements of traditional popular culture, leading some to characterize the reformers as ‘puritans’ due to their fervent focus on purification. However, on the positive side, there was an attempt to introduce Catholic and Protestant reforms to craftsmen and peasants. These contrasting aspects were particularly evident beyond Europe, where missionaries from around the world grappled with preaching Christianity in culturally unfamiliar territories.

The reformers took issue with various forms of popular religion, such as miracle and mystery plays, as well as religious festivals like saints' days and pilgrimages. Additionally, they objected to numerous secular aspects of popular culture, including: actors, ballads, bear-baiting, bullfights, cards, chapbooks, charivaris, charlatans, dancing, dicing, divining, fairs, folktales, fortune-telling, magic, masks, minstrels, puppets, taverns, and witchcraft. Many of these activities were associated with Carnival, making it a focal point for reform efforts. Reformers undertook actions such as burning books, destroying images, dismantling maypoles, shutting down theatres, and disbanding ‘abbeys of misrule’.

According to the reformers, there were several issues with popular culture. Firstly, Carnival was considered unchristian due to its remnants of ancient paganism, and the excessive indulgence in licentious behaviour by the people during this time.

The primary theological objection stemmed from the presence of pagan superstitions within many popular customs. Reformers, who often possessed a strong classical education, recognized parallels between ancient festivals and contemporary ones.

Additionally, practices such as magic were condemned as pagan survivals, particularly because figures like Circe and Medea were considered witches. Thus, the conflict between the godly and the ungodly went beyond a simple dispute; it was a theological battleground: “The godly were out to destroy traditional familiarity with the sacred, because they believed that familiarity breeds irreverence” (Huizinga, 1965; pg. 151). Ultimately, the conflict between the godly and the godless was not just a dispute over traditional intimacy with the sacred, but represented a profound cultural and theological conflict that shaped and transformed social norms.

Another argument against certain aspects of popular culture was that they were considered vanities displeasing to God, as they encouraged the wasteful expenditure of time and money. The clergy disapproved of taverns because they diverted people's attention from attending church services. Conversely, the government disapproved of taverns because they distracted people from participating in archery practice, which was seen important for defence.

During this period, there was a noticeable clash between two competing sets of ethics or ways of life. On one side was the ethic of the reformers, characterized by values such as decency, gravity, orderliness, prudence, reason, self-control, sobriety, and ‘this-worldly asceticism’, and on the other side, pure hedonism without control.

## 7.2 The culture of the godly

While the reform of popular culture is often portrayed negatively, it was driven by positive ideals. Reformers understood that they could not succeed unless they provided people with alternatives to the traditional songs and festivals they sought to abolish. Therefore, the proponents of reform endeavoured to create a new popular culture.



Protestants aimed to make the Bible accessible to ordinary people in their native languages, leading to the publication of vernacular Bibles, which became significant cultural events influencing language and literature in their respective countries. However, it would be inaccurate to assume that every Protestant craftsman or peasant family owned or read the Bible. Many likely acquired their knowledge of the Bible orally or second-hand. Bible readings held importance in both Lutheran and Calvinist services, with Psalms being particularly familiar to Protestants due to their use in hymns. The catechism, a booklet containing basic religious doctrine, played a central role in Protestant popular culture. Additionally, the messages of Psalms and catechisms were disseminated through other means. Protestant culture was characterized by sermon culture, where sermons could last for hours and evoke intense emotional experiences, with congregants actively participating through exclamations, sighs, or tears (Burke, 1978, pg. 226):

The existence of 'mechanic preachers' in England or the Cévennes showed that ordinary people might be attentive to the language and performing style of the preacher as well as his message; indeed, their culture predisposed them to be better connoisseurs or oral performances, whether by preachers, storytellers or ballad singers, than we are today.

These were just some of the ways popular culture was spread by reformers.

### 7.3 The second phase of the reform: 1650 – 1800

The second period of reform was marked by the end of the Council of Trent, which took place in from 1545 to 1565. The Council was motivated by the emergence of Luther's reformation, because the Church became aware that changes are needed, and did not agree with Luther's teaching. One of the decisions that were made during the Council was the worship of saints. A theologian from Louvain published a treatise on religious images, summarizing the position at the end of the Council of Trent. Molanus emphasized the importance of avoiding superstition but saw no issue with traditional images, such as those depicting the charity of St. Martin or St. Antony with his pig.

Though it is challenging to find Protestant regions that resisted the reform of popular culture after 1650, such areas did exist, particularly in mountainous regions like Norway, where Catholic and even pagan beliefs persisted into the eighteenth century. Another example is Wales, where many continued to observe saints' days, participate in processions with relics, and engage in activities such as races, football matches, and cockfights.

However, folktales and mining songs largely disappeared due to the efforts of Calvinists, Methodists in the north, and Baptists and Congregationalists in the south. Welsh popular culture became heavily influenced by chapel culture, which centred around hymns and sermons.

In the 1690s in England, societies were established for the 'reformation manners'. These groups aimed to curb activities such as fairs, gambling masquerades, plays, taverns, prostitution and obscene ballads. While their concern for the sanctity of the Lord's Day connected them to earlier Puritans, their focus was more on morals than theology, targeting respectability. The mid-18<sup>th</sup> century evangelical critique of English popular customs should be viewed as part of this ongoing tradition.

One of the biggest differences between the first and the second phase is the approach to witch-hunts. In the first phase, earlier reformers of popular culture like Clavin were very invested in witch-hunts, while during the second phase, they did not take witches seriously at all.

#### 7.4 Recent history of popular culture

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, scholars across various disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, philosophy, and history began to devote significant attention and effort to the study of mass or popular culture. Among them, some of the world's most renowned writers produced numerous works on popular culture that continue to hold significance. Notably, Matthew Arnold's essay 'Culture and Anarchy' and John Ruskin's 'Stones of Venice' are regarded as seminal works in the study of popular culture.

During this period, thinkers like Marx, Thorstein Veblen, and Dilthey explored truths related to class struggle, social conditioning, the examination of social strata and disparities in wealth, and the sociology of knowledge. Their contributions are

remembered for their profound impact on popular culture at the time, establishing them as influential figures in the field. Unlike earlier authors who offered polemics, they presented theories. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, popular culture was consistently viewed as a resource to be exploited for various objectives, often elitist in nature. One such goal was to assert the intellectual supremacy of the cultural elite.

The second quarter of the 20th century brought about various controversies regarding the value of popular culture. While these controversies originated as early as the mid-19th century, they gained wider traction in the 20th century. Hall (1983, pg. 18) highlights two books from 1930, namely *Revolt of the Masses* and *Culture and the Environment* which offered sharp analyses of popular culture filled with the author's fervour, seemingly masking a fear of the decline of civilization.

On the other hand, some authors adopted a melancholic tone in their works, almost resembling elegies, lamenting the disappearance of familiar culture and the squandering of resources. Ironically, intellectual communities of the time began to raise awareness of popular culture, advocating its acceptance and embrace by society.

The exploration of communication skills and mass media from diverse angles in the 1960s significantly enhanced the academic interest in popular culture: "The expansion of the study of the communication skills and the mass media from different perspectives during the 1960s contributed to the growth of interest in pop culture study and gave this interest an intellectual value" ( Hall, 1983; pg. 19). The expansion of popular culture studies was not a spontaneous phenomenon but rather stemmed from the examination of works by authors who perceived the decline of civilization in the rise of popular culture. A more serious exploration of popular culture commenced in 1967 with the foundation of the *Journal of Popular Culture*, marking a shift towards scientific and academic inquiry. This journal's founding was a significant milestone facilitated by Ray B. Browne, its editor, along with an esteemed team of editors including Carl Bode, Philip Durham, Leslie Fiedler, Russell Nye, Francis Lee Utley, and Northrop Frye. Initially met with scepticism, the journal quickly gained traction by attracting an engaged readership and providing a platform for scholarly research.

Supported by the Modern Language Association, the objectives of the journal were to foster unity among scholars, students, and non-academics interested in the serious study of popular culture, promote the integration of popular culture courses into academic curricula, and organize national and international conferences on popular culture.

A notable study conducted by Mark Gordon and Jack Nachbar in 1979 revealed a significant interest in popular culture within the academic community. Their survey found a high level of engagement, with 1,933 courses related to popular culture being offered in 260 four-year colleges across the United States (Hall, 1983; pg. 23). Extrapolating from these findings, it can be inferred that there are over 20,000 such courses offered at the state level. These courses are typically offered within departments or programs such as English, sociology, speech or communication, history, and American studies, covering topics such as popular literature, film, mass media, ethnic studies, radio and television, cultural or intellectual history, and music.

Popular culture began to increasingly influence interdisciplinary teaching and traditional social sciences and humanities courses during this period. The pronounced influence of popular culture has been particularly notable in general education courses. Hall (1983, pg. 22) points out that this has become especially apparent when teaching English. The role of popular culture in secondary school teaching is harder to assess, yet it is certainly noticeable. For example, magazines such as *Theory of Education*, *Art Education*, *High School Journal*, and *English Journal* regularly published articles on the possibilities and methods of teaching from the perspective of popular culture.

In any case, as Hall (1983, pg. 22-23) argues, the study and research of popular culture and its frequency do not depend on whether it is present in colleges and high schools. A testament to researchers' interest in popular culture is the fact that the annual conference of the Popular Culture Association gathers about two thousand people each time, and there are as many as eleven regional associations in the United States dedicated to the study of popular culture that regularly organize conferences and meetings. Publishers' interest in literary works on popular culture is also high, with some of the most popular magazines that frequently cover popular culture boasting thousands of subscribers each month.

Long gone are the days when scholars interested in popular culture were isolated by the academic community. Today, many universities in the United States have at least one professor who teaches popular culture, attracting a significant number of interested students. Hall (1983, pg. 23) predicted that interest in popular culture within the academic community would continue to grow and that the number of students wanting to study this field would increase.

Today, it is easier than ever to reach out to scholars and others interested in popular culture. The advent of social media has enabled individuals to form communities with communication channels more advanced than ever before. Although Hall wrote his work in 1983, his assumption about the enduring interest in popular culture has proven to be accurate. Interest in popular culture continues to grow, and it seems that the number of people who enjoy video games, comics, movies, and similar areas of popular culture has never been higher.

## 8. Forms of popular culture in the early modern period

In the 16<sup>th</sup> and the 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, many European countries studied history with the intent of gaining practical benefits for the present. Unlike art, history was not pursued just for its own sake. This approach was deemed unacceptable, and any recollection of historical events had to serve a practical purpose. History was discipline that was a great source of experience and lessons. Such an assumption has linked historians who look to history as the source of government, moralists who value it for its examples of conduct, and theologians who saw history in the deeds of God (Thomas, 2009; pg. 186).

The discovery of North America was one of the reasons why the new historical period started: 'The early modern period began around 1550 and ended around 1700 year' (Greenberg, 2013; pg. 76). This period was marked by significant crises in European civilization, and attempts to address these crises within a limited timeframe of about 150 years. During this time, social structures underwent substantial, lasting, and likely irreversible changes, with the 17<sup>th</sup> century being pivotal. During this period, European societies had undergone significant political, religious, and economic changes. It was a period that witnessed the rise of the monarchy but also the development of the bourgeoisie, and the first signs of capitalism. Religion had a profound impact on everyday life in the 17th century: "Religious reforms and conflicts, including the Thirty Years' War, continued in Europe. Magic and witchcraft were present in popular culture, and the witch hunt was the dark side of this period" (Greenberg, 2013; 76). In summary, the early modern period in Europe was a time of profound political, religious and economic transformations, marked by the rise of monarchies, the emergence of the bourgeoisie, the early stages of capitalism, and significant religious influence on daily life, including the dark phenomena of witch hunts.

### 8.1 Theatre

Theatre was extremely important during the early modern period. In England, numerous plays were staged in theatres like The Globe, with the works of William Shakespeare and others appealing to a broader audience. The rise of English theatre during the early modern period marked a shift from amateur dramatic activities to the emergence of professional acting companies. Such changes were often caused by

changes in religious orders and religious practices. According to Lin, (2009, pg. 271) the Protestant Reformers wanted to remove certain feasts from the liturgical calendar, so many of the rituals traditionally associated with and performed on these feasts disappeared from religious life altogether and were transferred to the theatre. In the early modern era, people abandoned the theatre in open spaces like markets and started performing plays in closed halls. It was a significant step forward for theatrical production because the enclosed halls allowed for better control over light, sound, atmosphere, and performance. In England, the first permanent theatres, such as the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane, which opened in 1663, began to be built.

## 8.2 Visual art

Contemporary visual art encompasses not only traditional mediums like painting but also the art of film. However, as noted by Porter (2013., pg. 18), during the early modern period, the term 'visual art' primarily referred to painting. The transition from the Middle Ages to the early modern era was profoundly shaped by the Renaissance, which had a significant impact on the evolution of painting. Renaissance artists revisited classical ideals from antiquity, delving into concepts of perspective, anatomy, and light, and produced works centred on the human figure and narrative. Michelangelo Buonarroti, renowned for masterpieces such as *David* and *The Creation of Adam* adorning the Sistine Chapel ceiling, emerged as one of the era's most influential painters. Another prominent figure, Leonardo da Vinci, epitomized Renaissance artistry with his iconic portrait of Mona Lisa, which epitomizes the era's fascination with portraiture and natural illumination. Paintings from this period prioritized meticulous detail, realism, and delved into the nuanced emotional depths of their subjects.

In literature, the Baroque period was full of complex styles and themes. Literacy was becoming more widespread, enabling the spread of written works and newspapers: "It was also the time of the early printing revolution, which contributed to the faster dissemination of information. Fashion played an important role in 17th century popular culture. Slothfulness and richness of clothing were signs of prestige" (Greenberg, 2013; pg 76). Secular city life, with its shops, cafes and social gatherings, was everywhere. People enjoyed various forms of entertainment, including games of chance, fairs, and sports competitions like horse racing and cockfighting. Travel

became more accessible, and the discovery of new worlds and cultures introduced fresh perspectives and influences to popular culture.



## 9. Popular culture as part of identity

Over the past few centuries, culture has been a topic of contemplation and discourse. In bygone eras, literate individuals engaged in discussions concerning the dichotomy between tradition and modernity, the nuances of artistic and literary works, and the intricate interplay between culture and society. While they may not have been fully cognizant of their own cultural identity or their role in cultural advancement, the mere ability for individuals to observe cultural landmarks, regardless of personal affinity or intention, speaks volumes. Primitive societies of the past did not systematically study their own or other cultures and social structures. The examination of anthropological frameworks, social evolution, and intellectual development might even have been perceived as a luxury (Rudikoff, 1975, pg. 606).

Society experienced profound transformations during the 19th and 20th centuries, largely due to industrialization and the rapid expansion of urban areas, which exerted significant influence on cultural formation. Moreover, improving living standards brought about notable shifts in lifestyle, with the concept of prosperity and consumerism extending beyond the middle class. Fiske (2001; pg. 137) highlights that in a capitalist consumer society, everyone assumes the role of a consumer, whether for fulfilling basic material necessities like food and clothing or cultural needs related to media, education, and language. Consequently, each act of consumption becomes a form of cultural production.

The phenomenon of popular culture attracted particular attention after World War II. Early literature, theatre, music, and entertainment were undoubtedly topics people were interested in before, yet a new kind of culture emerged as something that people needed at that very time, after two great world wars in a short period (Rudikoff, 1975; pg. 606). New forms of entertainment emerged during the phenomenon of the decline of ancient folk culture, and new forms of entertainment included circuses, preachers, actors, musicians, and merchants who prepared entertainment entirely independent of what was known in folk culture then (Rudikoff; 1975; pg. 607). Popular culture became ubiquitous and generated widespread interest, especially in the 1950s when economic power was rising again, mainly in the United States. At that time, American society was marked by elements of popular culture such as television entertainment programs,

popular music, movies, mass magazines, fashion trends, and lifestyles that derived from popular culture.

Young people became key actors in social change, and their cultural patterns became the foundation for trends in popular culture. That was the time when the desire to consume, own, and change consumer goods was born, and the products of consumer culture became a way of expressing the desire for affirmation, relaxation, leisure, and entertainment. With the emergence of various forms of sub-culture, as a way of expressing the peculiarities of the post-war generations of young people, there was a departure from the traditional cultural patterns of older generations. The development of the entertainment industry and the increase in purchasing power enabled the development of popular culture, where places such as jukeboxes, coffee shops, and jazz and rock clubs became gathering places for young people who formed their cultural identity through their leisure time. Also, some aspects of popular culture, such as television, had a significant influence on the formation and development of consumer culture, where viewers often began to consume certain products or services they saw on the screen.

Rudikoff (1975, pg. 607) points out that demographic and social changes were so visible that one could say humans had been rediscovered. Certainly, they discovered opportunities for a better life for themselves, and they began to migrate, moving from the countryside to the cities, other countries, and continents. The purpose of the development and the acceptance of popular culture was precisely the change of identity. People no longer wanted classes and hierarchies, there were new phenomena in society and the ways of public entertainment, and the traditional culture, which at that time had an exceptionally strong hierarchy, was under attack. There was no longer the pursuit of perfection, and expression of beauty and culture began to be subjected to personal preferences and definitions, and most were subjected to one's own identity.

Traditional culture was replaced by popular culture. It does not mean that traditional culture has lost its significance. It has its value and importance from a historical point of view, and we mustn't forget it because it was part of the identity of people in the past, and it led to popular culture and all its branches that are still being developed today. But traditional culture isn't coming back into people's lives, except in cases when it comes back through popular culture and some forms of it (Edensor, 2002; pg. 12). National elites, prominent citizens, and governments all around the world, still promote

the idea that only high culture can give meaning to national identity and that people need to connect to high culture to gain some form of international prestige (Edensor, 2002; pg. 12).

National symbols of high culture, such as state galleries, international concert halls, high cultural institutions, opera houses, and theatres, still represent status symbols in society (Edensor, 2002; pg. 15). National governments always prefer to allocate funds to high cultural institutions rather than, say, a local film festival. However, statistically speaking, high culture has faced destabilization after the development of popular culture because most of the citizens of each country are more interested in popular culture than any other form, including high culture. An increasing number of activities and events have acquired national significance and are no longer considered to be of significance regarding the high culture. For example, it is well-known how important it is to citizens when a national sports team achieves some international or world success. Similarly, the success of film directors, television stars, singers, and writers is something that many people value highly, and it is the evidence of the extent to which popular culture has become a significant part of identity.

## 10. Conclusion

The early modern period in history typically spans from the late Middle Ages to the early phases of the modern era, serving as a transitional phase between these two epochs and witnessing a multitude of historical events and transformations. While the exact timeframe of the early modern period may vary depending on specific contexts and regions, it generally encompasses the 15th to the 18th century. This era was characterized by significant shifts, including profound religious changes instigated by the Reformation, which fractured the Catholic Church and birthed the Protestant Church, reshaping Europe's religious landscape. Concurrently, European exploration expanded into new territories, leading to the establishment of colonies across the globe. The period was also marked by numerous wars and conflicts, such as the Thirty Years' War and the English Civil War, which played pivotal roles in shaping Europe's political map.

These societal upheavals necessitated corresponding changes in social structures and hierarchies, culminating in the emergence of a vibrant popular culture that supplanted traditional folk customs. Though the concept of popular culture in its contemporary form did not yet exist, various elements of popular culture during this era profoundly influenced daily life and societal norms. Literature and theatre played integral roles in early modern popular culture, with fairy tales, legends, and theatrical performances often serving as conduits for moral teachings and cultural values. Music conveyed the traditions and narratives of the people, while visual arts such as painting, sculpture, and handicrafts flourished. Customs and festivals provided primary sources of entertainment, while increasing literacy rates and the advent of printing further facilitated cultural dissemination. Undoubtedly, popular culture in the early modern period played a crucial role in shaping the identities, values, and everyday experiences of its contemporary populace, leaving a lasting imprint on the trajectory of culture and society in subsequent epochs.

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