

Intro to the Intro: "The Flug in the Air"

Introduction

"Why Would Anybody Want to Study That?"

A number of years ago, I spoke at a conference for Christian leaders in Europe. I did a few workshops, nothing major. But still, an exhausting half a week. Everyone was having a last breakfast at the hotel, and then we'd pack and go home. One of the keynote speakers came to our table and asked if he could join us. This man (who shall remain nameless to protect the guilty) is an internationally known apologist, and a fairly brilliant man. As we chatted about this and that, he asked me what I do. I am a college lecturer. He asked me what subjects I taught, and I told him about one of my favorite classes, "Popular Culture and Media Theory," and I told him what it covered. He then leaned back in his chair, hand stroking his chin thoughtfully, and mused, "Why would anybody want to study that?"

I have been studying popular culture for about 20 years, so that question might have been a tad bit tactless. I wish his response were somehow atypical. But it wasn't. It's a response that I've become used to. I can see it in the eyes of people when I tell them what I do and they say, "Oh, well, that sounds interesting," as if I dissected slugs for a living. But this apologist was the first one who was honest enough to put it so directly. It's an attitude that many Christians unfortunately share: Isn't studying popular culture simply a colossal waste of time? Who cares about Madonna or Star Wars or "World of Warcraft"? Isn't popular culture simply trivial, brain melting, stupor-inducing, superficial tripe?

Allow me to respond with a few provocative quotations:

"If 'religion is the opiate of the people', then immersive multiplayer 3D virtual worlds are hard-core Afghani heroin."

- Science fiction and technology writer Bruce Sterling.

"Anyway, I stopped going to churches and got into a different kind of religion. Don't laugh. That's what being in a rock 'n' roll band is. Showbiz is shamanism, music is worship. Whether it's worship of women or their designer, the world or its destroyer, whether it comes from that ancient place we call soul or simply the spinal cortex, whether the prayers are on fire with a dumb rage or dove-like desire, the smoke goes upwards, to God or something you replace God with - usually yourself."

- Bono, lead singer of the band U2

"Popular culture is the new Babylon, into which so much art and intellect now flow. It is our imperial sex theater, supreme temple of the western eye. The pagan past, never dead, flames again in our mystic hierarchies of stardom."

- Post-feminist social critic and gadfly Camille Paglia.

What ties these three quotations together? It is the connection between religion and forms of popular culture: interactive multiplayer online gaming environments in the first, rock 'n' roll in the second, and popular culture as a whole (especially the cult of celebrity) in the third. Whether or not you agree with the details, all three quotations talk about popular culture in terms that used to be reserved for religion. In other words, these writers see popular culture as an influential player in the

realm of the sacred, in the realm of ultimate meanings, in the realm of worldview. And such a perspective makes a good deal of sense. Popular culture has become not only a sign of the times, but also something of a rudder of the spirit, a touchstone for our deepest desires and aspirations.

The problem is that popular culture is also a pervasive influence. It seems at once ephemeral and vital. Christians often either dismiss its influence as trivial, or we become flustered and assume a defensive posture. Popular culture is like something floating in the air around us, and it has the power to influence our beliefs. But we're not really sure what to do about it.

Allow me to illustrate with a parable called "The Flug in the Air":

Once upon a time (in a galaxy not so far away), there lived a community much like ours. One day, their scientists stumbled upon a discovery: there was something in the air they breathed. They called it "flug," for lack of a better name. They didn't know where flug came from. Perhaps it was generated by the natural activities of the community's life together. Perhaps it was an alien substance that had invaded. No one knew for sure. But one thing they did know: Flug changed people. In some, the change was radical and disturbing. In others, the change was more subtle. But every person, every breathing person, underwent a change. Most people didn't even notice, or didn't care. They just kept on breathing and changing and living their lives.

Some people became alarmed and angry. They moved away to the high and lofty mountains, hoping they wouldn't have to breathe the flug-infested air. But being so high up, the sheer altitude and isolation changed them, but in a different way than people who breathed in the flug. And, as it turned out, they couldn't really avoid it, any more than you or I can avoid breathing.

Some people actually enjoyed the change and became flug-enthusiasts. They saw flug as a doorway into a deeper understanding of the mysteries of life, or something like that. They couldn't get enough. They even found a way to distill it and spike their cigarettes so as to increase their intake of flug. They called them "flugarettes." Some people thought this group was being naïve in their surrender to flug, but you couldn't really convince them otherwise. They just really, really enjoyed their flug.

And finally, there was a group of people who couldn't decide what to think of flug. So they started asking questions: How and why are we being changed? Where did it come from? Is flug good or bad for us? What does it mean? What is the best way to live with it in our air? They too distilled flug, and then tasted and tested it. One would dip his finger into the beaker, taste it, and say, "Hey, this stuff isn't half bad!" Another would spit out what he had just tasted and say, "Bleah! This stuff isn't half good!" And, as it turned out, they were both right. They managed to build a microscope to study flug-distillate. They would lean over it for hours, and they could actually see the goodness and the badness of flug, dark and light filaments spreading out like the tendrils of a vine. The problem was, the dark and light filaments were woven and tangled together, so you can imagine how hard and laborious a process it was to disentangle the good strands from the bad. It was all just so mixed together. But still they persevered, for they knew that mixture meant something.

This book is for that last group of people, the ones who are interested in taking a closer look at flug. Everything that follows flows from a certain assumption, namely, that popular culture is very similar to the flug in the air we breathe. Popular culture is all around us, and it does tend to get under our skin. It does influence us. Of course, the influence isn't on our lungs, but on our worldviews – on the way we understand God, the world, each other, and ourselves. And, like flug, popular culture is a mixed bag, a messy mixture of good and bad. Comedian Oliver Hardy used to say to Stan Laurel, "Another fine mess you've gotten us into!" Living in a world suffused by popular culture has landed us, quite literally, into a fine, meaningful mess.

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