

Intro Part I: Popular Culture's Influence on Worldview

I. Popular Culture's Influence on Worldview

Popular culture has emerged in the last 100 years or so as one of the most significant (perhaps the most significant) carriers of worldview and values in the West. Popular culture's influence travels far beyond the West as well, now that the forces of globalization carry MTV, video games, and shows like Baywatch and 24 to the farthest reaches of the globe. For that reason alone, popular culture deserves attention and serious reflection. It is anything but trivial. It wields considerable influence in our societies, and has done so for a long time.

Even though we think of popular culture as a recent phenomenon (and mass media certainly is relatively recent), popular culture has been a shaping influence for a long, long time – ever since our ancestors sat around campfires telling stories of love and heroism. And those songs and stories have influenced the way people have understood their world. Classicist and Shakespeare scholar Paul Cantor notes:

Socrates recounts in the Apology (22b-c) that among the most important people in Athens he interrogated were the poets, because, as becomes clear in several Platonic dialogues, the poets both reflect and help shape popular opinion on wisdom, piety, and other virtues. Poetry in its various forms, including drama, was the popular culture of ancient Greece. As Plato makes clear in the Republic, Homer was the educator of the whole Greek world . . .

Further, if you actually read the ancient Greek poets, you will find that sex and violence in popular culture is not exactly a new phenomenon either. Popular culture has been around for as long as civilization has.

Take a more recent example: in 1744, the publication of Johan Wolfgang von Goethe's popular novelette *The Sorrows of the Young Werther* caused a sensation in Europe. It started a continent-wide fashion trend of young men wearing open-collared "poet shirts," yellow trousers, and blue vests, all copying the hero of Goethe's book. Later, Europe experienced a rash of suicides as young men and women followed the lead of the book's young lovelorn hero. Popular culture has been wielded a powerful influence in societies for a long, long time.

Consider even more recent examples of the effect of popular culture on the way we view the world. Think of how men in the West have changed the way they think about women, sex and beauty since *Playboy* began circulation in 1951. Think of how we understand material success under the influence of the many celebrity lifestyle magazines and TV shows. Think of how Nike ads have changed the way we think about our own bodies, about exercise, about pain ("Just Do It"). Think of how Tolkien's books, and the movies inspired by the books, have shaped our understanding of heroism, sacrifice, and evil. Think of how our sense of humor has changed since the airing of *The Simpsons* in 1990.

Sometimes, the cultural changes caused by popular culture can be profound. In America, there is a generational divide between those who were too old to enjoy *Star Wars* when it was first released in the 1977 (that's Episode IV for you youngsters), and those who have grown up with it and have seen it 10 times or more (that is, those born in the 1960s or later). For some Americans, *Star Wars* became a quasi-religion, and for many others, it crystallized a turn away from organized religion towards more open sort of "spirituality," however that is defined. Popular culture has an immense impact on us and on our worldviews that borders on the religious.

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