

Looking Closely at Popular Culture Messaging

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A closer look at popular culture artifacts and expressions permits insight into the messages about social issues that are being subliminally broadcast. There are many social issues portrayed in present-day popular culture, to wit: Violence, indecency versus free speech, race and ethnicity, social and economic class, gender, and sexuality. Certainly, some messages are more clear than others. Take, for example, Lorde's contemporary song *Royals*. It is certain with verses such as, "That kind of luxe just ain't for us. We crave a different kind of buzz" (AZLyrics, 2013), and others, that the songwriter, Lorde, is conveying a message about social and economic class, a current social issue. Contrariwise, if you asked me to detail other social issues in this pop-culture artifact, I would have a more difficult time articulating which they are. Veronica Bayetti Flores, an independent columnist, writes: "While I love a good critique of wealth accumulation and inequity, this song is not one; in fact, it is deeply racist. Because we all know who she's thinking [about] when we're talking gold teeth, Cristal (champagne) and Maybachs (Hume, 2013)...." Her view that Lorde's song, a piece of popular culture, portrayed race and ethnicity was rebroadcast by TIME magazine and CNN newsroom. Alternatively, some hold that Lorde, a self-proclaimed feminist (Entertainment Wise, 2017), was writing about gender and sexuality in her song *Royals* with lines such as "Let me be your ruler, you can call me queen Bee" and "And I'm in love with being queen" (AZLyrics, 2013). Each of these conveys her feminism. In my collegiate studies on popular culture and humanities, I was recently prompted in a quiz to pick precisely two social issues expressed in this song from the aforementioned choices of social issues. I became bewildered by the prospect of choosing precisely two and was surprised to find that it was neither the combination of social class and race nor was it the amalgamation of social class and gender

social issues. I arrived at the conclusion that this is subjective and references to social issues can be both overt, clear, and can be identified by anyone, and yet others are covert and become more visible only after an applicable, and major, life experience.

Elements of past or present culture appear in all mediums: movies, episodic shows, comics, books, graphic novels, songs, et cetera. It is when the particular artifact in question receives mass attention in a short period of time, conceptually termed “viral”, that it transcends into “popular culture”. Because of the voluminous attention received, the artifact influences how many view an idea, or even, a group of people. Take the Vietnam War, as an example, during which time racism against the Vietnamese abounded in the Americas as a direct result of the United States war effort. Similarly, the many wars in the Middle East created American hatred for the Arabic ethnic group. The rallies on immigration reform in the United States have created a comparable schism between Americans and Hispanics alike. Let us not forget the recent racial animosity against the Chinese because of reports of the origin of the corona virus, which some believe came from Chinese wet markets, and others believe was an accidental release of manufactured biological warfare.

Undoubtedly, no discourse on popular culture could be complete without comment on whether popular culture artifacts serve to further reinforce dominant ideas and beliefs, effectively slowing the pace of social change, or if they raise a stark awareness of said issues and promote reform. In a treatise on revolutionary cultural practice by communist anti-revisionists, this very same question was raised. The answer was mixed. Niel Erikson, an anti-revisionist, stated, “a single cultural object can contain both tendencies (Eriksen, 2009)”. He ultimately arrived at the conclusion that in the majority of cases, popular culture artifacts did not serve to further reinforce

a dominant value or belief, but instead, were vital to successful revolution (Eriksen, 2009). Further evidence is seen in third world countries' attempts to prevent social reform through censorship. In conclusion, popular culture artifacts play a large and prominent role in exposing critical social issues through creative vocals in songs or graphic videos and other methods.

References

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