

The Arts in Our Popular Culture

Why should Christians be concerned with culture? Aren't we merely passing through this world as strangers and pilgrims? Culture is not simply about reading the right books, being familiar with Bach, Beethoven, Mozart or Rembrandt's great art works. Romanowski argues that it has much to do with faith; it is part of being "fearfully and wonderfully made" in the image of God (Ps. 139:14). He states that culture represents human responses to God's first and foundational command: "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it" (Gen. 1:28). God entrusts ordinary human beings with developing and maintaining His creation.

The Collapse of Western Culture

But what has happened to our Western culture? The world has changed in the last six decades. Since the Second World War, moral concepts have largely vanished, and the dance-your-troubles-away mood of the 1920's and 30s have been superseded by the notion of "doing-your-own things". Increasingly we see ourselves living in a post-Christian and even a neo-pagan world that is bland, shallow, careless, nihilistic, witnessing the loss of the Christian ethical tradition "of self-discipline, self-denial, and sacrifice." We may even call it a homeless culture, without a lodestar to guide it, experiencing the loss of love for the true and the beautiful – a culture without God. We are either in the hands of God, Whom Blaise Pascal called, "not the God of the philosophers but the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob", or we are alone in a meaningless universe.

A real sense of foreboding of the collapse of our culture has been foreseen by numerous Christian scholars. The Dutch historian, Johan Huizenga (1872-1945), was briefly imprisoned in a concentration camp and then released to live under surveillance. He died shortly before the liberation of Holland. In 1943 he wrote *Geschonden Wereld (Damaged World)* which was published right after the liberation of Holland. He believed that the foundations for a speedy renewal of a new civilization were not laid. Nowhere has greed, lust for power, and violence been abandoned. Huizenga wondered whether humans will live again in the light of the crucifixion, resurrection, election, and judgment? He believed that modern humanity in Europe and America are focussed on consumerism and chasing after fun. He observed that much of our culture has become vulgar. He also prophesied that the world of tomorrow will not be ripe for a revival of Christianity. A similar belief was expressed by Nobel Prize for literature winner, Czeslaw Milosz . In 1951, he wrote in the *Captive Mind*: "Today man believes there is *nothing* in him, so he accepts *anything*, even if he knows it is to be bad, in order to find himself at one with others, in order not to be alone."

As I see it, popular culture is a symptom of the cultural collapse of our society and the general spirit of the age. Whether we like it or not, it is our world, the world of our children, and the world of our non-Christian friends and neighbours. Given its pervasive influence, we should be willing to try to understand it. Professor Stanley Grenz argues that we must understand popular culture just because it is our world; it is the world we

are trying to reach with the Gospel. More and more academics are aware of the need to grasp the meaning of the culture that surrounds them. For example, in 1998 the American Academy of Religion held its conference at Walt Disney World and focussed the lectures and seminars on popular culture.

Popular Culture

What is popular culture? It is by nature trivial. Its greatest influence is the way it shapes how we think and feel, and even the way we worship. It specializes in instant gratification. But like most instant things, it may spoil your taste for something better. It appeals to greed and laziness. The art products in popular culture are primarily commercial, based on profit making. "Much of the popular art that is produced is geared to market forces," observes William D. Romanowski. "Success and achievement are gauged solely in terms of commercial viability, which translates into "popular" TV ratings. The late George Gerbner, a media analyst, observed, "For the first time in human history the stories are told not by parents, not by the school, not by the church, not by the community or tribe and in some cases not even by the native country but by a relatively small and shrinking group of global conglomerates with something to sell." And as Gerbner indicated, it is clear that in contemporary society the producers of popular art inform our understanding of culture as much as any single factor.

Popular art works do not challenge but affirm the beliefs and values of patrons. For most people, evaluation of popular art work is left almost completely to personal taste and whim.

Technology

Our popular culture cannot be separated from the phenomenal development of technology. What is new today becomes quickly obsolete, to be replaced by the latest and newest gadget. This rapid technological change doomed the fight for decency in American popular culture, as every successive innovation weakened the power of regulators, moral and otherwise, while expanding the venues where human weakness could be exploited for fun and profit (mainly the latter). The result is the unrestrainable popular culture of today, where every concept, no matter how lowbrow or how vile, can find a platform and an audience.

Many young people and not so young in our Western world have been raised on digital technology. By day they may sit in front of a computer screen in an office cubicle. By night they either search the internet or sit in front of the TV. Thanks to cable television, our news, weather, sports, movies, and even buying on line are all instantly available. The contest for people's hearts and minds exists in our media-saturated society. "You may think that Billy Graham is the leading evangelist in America, but he's not," Rev. Donald Wildmon of the American Family Association said. "The leading evangelists in America are those people who make the TV programs."

Television

For a large segment of the population, television has so refashioned and reshaped their lives that it is hard to imagine what life was like before it. Seldom does anyone ask, "What have you read lately?" One is more likely to hear the question, "What have you seen lately?" We have become, for better or worse, a visually oriented society. TV is brainwashing the public. The job of programmers is to be new and up-to-the minute, which means that they are compelled to follow the latest trends and insights and ideas, often without any attempt to come to grips with their underlying principles. I have often been told, "I have *seen* such and such a report on TV, therefore, it must be true." But Francis Schaeffer rightly points out: "TV manipulates viewers by its normal way of operating. Many viewers seem to assume that when they have seen something on TV, they have seen it with their own eyes. But this is not so, for one must never forget that every television minute has been edited. The viewer does not see the event. He sees... an *edited* event or an *edited image* of that event."

Television, in the course of one or two decades, has changed the habits, knowledge and whole outlook on the world of a large majority of the people. In *Modern Art and Death of A Culture*, Hans Rookmaaker observes that today things can be shown in TV programs that would have been impossible even five years ago. "Protesters are right when they say that capitalistic society is prostituting women for the sake of profits."

Commercial messages are omnipresent. Advertising dollars can influence the content of TV programs. But advertising language is, by definition, dishonest. A TV sitcom has to adhere to a strict time limit with breaks in the narrative to accommodate commercials. A widely reported study by the Kaiser Family Foundation in 2005, revealed a trend in television programming toward more sexual subject matter. Another survey reported that 51 percent of the teenagers are getting their information about sex from movies and TV shows.

In *Truth Decay*, Douglas Groothuis points out that on TV, amusement trumps all other values and takes captive every topic. Every subject – whether war, religion, business, law or education – must be presented in a lively, amusing or stimulating manner. Images appear and disappear and reappear without a proper rational context. An attempt at a sobering news story about slavery in the Sudan is followed by a lively advertising of soap or automobiles. Even news broadcasters manage to inform their viewers about the greatest tragedies with a smile. A few evening hours spent with the offerings of television shows a sit-com dilemma solved in less than half an hour, upset stomachs relieved in less than thirty seconds, and political candidates accepted or rejected based upon paid political announcements. Consequently, TV contributes to the lack of responsible politics and diminished democracy.

The dependency on commercials has results in the loss of restrictions, economic or otherwise. Viewers are occasionally warned that the "following program contains adult material ... etc." The latter only serves to ensure that more, not fewer children will watch. Taboos continue to be broken in the pursuit of audiences. It seems that little can shock viewers anymore, least of all intimate revelations about personal lives. Some shows do not hesitate to parade the most outlandish perversions, the most degraded appetites. I

also strongly believe that by watching a constant diet of violence on TV, our society has become systematically desensitized to the pain and suffering of others. While movies and television desensitize viewers against inflicting suffering on other human beings, video games should also concern parents. In some of them life-like figures pop up, the player has to respond automatically by aiming and pulling the trigger. It seems these games are a factor contributing to the increasing number of senseless and cruel murders of younger children of the privileged as well as the disadvantaged.

But there is always someone somewhere who can find something uplifting and inspiring in the impossible. In *Everyday Apocalypse: The Sacred Revealed in Radiohead, the Simpsons and other Pop Culture Icons*, David Dark manages to see something redemptive even in the Simpsons. He argues that viewing *The Simpsons* can be an intensely liberating experience. "We're called to recognize and be confronted by our own absurdity." He says that when viewed generously, the Simpsons constitutes an exception. "In their loud impotence bumping through their stories like a bewildered bunch of open wounds, we find them dear."

Music

The messages of popular culture are perhaps voiced most strongly and clearly through music. Commercialism, the effective selling of products governs every aspect of the popular music industry. The development of talent and technical virtuosity take time. But the ever increasing demand for singers and a never-ending stream of fresh faces cannot wait for talent to emerge. A "budding artist" with a guitar and a song can have his/her fifteen minutes of fame.

Samuel Johnson (1789-84) said that "music is the only sensual pleasure without vice." But the idea that music was to be used for God's glory has been greatly undermined. Many singers/songwriters frequently concern themselves specifically with the confusion and relativism of our age. Too many pop artists heavily emphasize the themes of sex, drugs, instant gratification and violence. In the 1980s, "heavy metal" rock performers openly admitted there were few moral restraints in either their music or behaviour. This type "of music" and much of the music on MTV has become increasingly rebellious – rebelling against Biblical morality and values, and God Himself. In other words, one does not need to take classes in music appreciation to listen to the latest release from Madonna or the latest Rock band on the scene. Steve Lawhead remarks that the whole system feeds on the 'new' – new faces, new gimmicks, new sounds. "Yesterday in pop music is not only dead; it is ancient history."

The Christian's Challenge

Popular culture and its art forms feed the idols of individual or groups of audience members. Because of our fallen nature we need no enticement to idolatry because our hearts are "artesian wells of idolatry" (Mark 7:14-15, 20-23). Rookmaaker said that "God has given man such tremendous possibilities in the creation He has made. Yet men have misused them, wrecked them, turned their backs on the God who made them." He

also pointed out that too frequently Christians have not understood that art and literature, philosophy and even popular music were the agents of the spirit of the age, and have left these alone or optimistically assumed they were too remote to be of influence.

Whether we like it or not, the problem for Christians remains. How must we deal with the culture around us which is often the fruit of a non-Christian worldview? It is tempting to simply retreat from engagement of culture altogether. Francis Schaeffer warned that most Christians are more concerned with personal peace and affluence than having an impact on their society. Of course, it is hard to keep to the right path; temptations are legion. It is much easier to pay lip service to the Lord than to live counter cultural lives. But too many Christians uncritically imbibe whatever popular culture feeds them. "The truth is, followers of Christ are everywhere and are everyday folks," said Jonathan Black, Grace Hill Media consultant. "It would naturally follow that a large percentage of Christians are watching – and enjoying – *Desperate Housewives*, *The Amazing Race*, *American Idol* and even Red Sox-Yankee games." But these and similar programs are not harmless forms of entertainment that may be enjoyed without a second thought. The potential for cultural accommodation is real and Christians need to develop a critical awareness of the popular cultural landscape. Spending hours watching television each day says a great deal about our priorities and the use of our God-given abilities and spiritual gifts. If we as adults keep the mind exposed to a constant diet of secular programs based on a non-Christian world view, how can we warn our children of the spiritual dangers of our time? How can we be a witness in our culture if we behave and act like the world around us?

Proper recognition of the surrounding world is necessary before we can address it properly. We need a Biblical "lens" through which we can see the culture – creation, fall, redemption, second coming. Christians should "read" their culture in the light of the Bible. It emphasizes the sovereignty of God, the human sinfulness and inadequacy that demand dependence on God's grace alone, and the necessity of striving toward the goal of glorifying God.

Conclusion

In *All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes: Christians & Popular Culture*, Kenneth A. Myers warns, "It might seem an extreme assertion at first, but I believe that *the challenge of living with popular culture* may well be as serious as persecution and plagues were for the saints of earlier centuries. Being thrown to the lions or living in the shadow of gruesome death are straightforward if unattractive threats. Enemies that come loudly and visibly are usually much easier to fight than those that are undetectable. Physical affliction (even to the point of death) for the sake of Christ is a heavy cross, but at least it can be readily recognized at the time as a trial of faith." He is right. When we no longer approach our culture with a Biblically formed worldview, we allow the devil to walk into our lives on bedroom slippers. He often uses modern popular culture to lead us astray. He works so subtly that we believe nothing is happening to our souls. We won't hear him come, but he will work to erode character, spoil innocent

pleasures, and cheapen life itself. If we are not watchful, we will become homeless in God's world.

Johan D. Tangelder