

## MASS AND POPULAR CULTURE, THEIR FEATURES AND SPECIFICS

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**Abstract:** The paper deals with the issues of culture with a specific emphasis put on the matter of mass and popular cultures. In the paper the author reflects fundamental theoretical outcomes of culture and submitted subcultures, their definitions and characteristics according to different authors and from different perspectives of investigation. A part of the paper also involves individual difference attributes and specifics of mass and popular cultures, as well as briefly depicted and defined individual philosophical streams (schools) related to a concrete type of culture. The paper is of theoretical character and by means of theoretical reflection it introduces to and simultaneously compares two independent units of culture.

**Keywords:** culture, mass culture, popular culture, mass media, audience.

### 1 Introduction

Generally speaking, culture as such is a part of any society. Individual societies are characterised by different spiritual and tangible values, which they have acquired during its origin, development and existence. In a complex way, it is possible to call a set of such values with the term culture. However, sole exact defining of this term is very difficult. The etymological origin of the term culture lies in the Latin language, where this notion was connected with the term *colere* – to cultivate, to farm. Later, a Roman statesman, rhetor and philosopher Cicero called philosophy the so-called culture of spirit (*cultura animi*), which meant that the term culture started to be understood in intellectual meaning, as well.

E. Delgadová (2010, pp. 142) states that the first modern global and scientific definition of ethnological and anthropological understanding of culture, which is one of the most respected benefits in anthropology, was presented in the second half of 1890th by the English anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor. He understands culture as a unit, which includes knowledge, belief, art, moral, law, customs and all other abilities and habits that a human being has acquired as a member of the society. Tylor understood culture from the positions of consistent evolutionism i.e. theoretical approach, which seeks to objectively describe and explain long-term processes of cultural changes as a configuration of learnt behaviour and its results shared by members of certain society. This new theory of culture is definitely diverted from until then accepted definitions and conceptions of culture. According to Tylor's definition, culture is thus manifestation of the whole social life of a human being, it is characterized by collective dimension, it is not transferred biologically – by inheriting, but it is acquired unconsciously in the process of socialization of a human being.

V. Gažová (2003, pp. 105) explains how we can come across – most often in theoretical reflection, but also in everyday usage – the definition of culture based on its understanding as an adaptive system; culture is here perceived as a set of typically human means of a human being's adjusting to their environment. Therefore, we can talk about culture in at least two levels, as follows:

- Culture as a universal human phenomenon, a specifically human activity, which is not natural to other biological forms of life. From universal standpoint it is thus the most important sign with which a human being differs from other animals. This universal all human culture is manifested in huge amount of local cultures.
- Culture is reflected and investigated as a specific way of life of different groups of people. In this sense individual local cultures represent unique and unrepeatable configurations of artefacts, socio-cultural rules, ideas, symbolical systems and cultural institutions, typical for a certain society or a social group.

From psychological perspective, a definition is offered by psychoanalyst S. Freud (1990, pp. 276), who perceives culture as everything with which human life elevated over its animal conditions and with which it differs from the life of animals. We consider B. Kafka (1992, pp. 7) to be the author of one of the most pertinent specification of culture; for him culture is what comes into existence through work and leads to genuine human good. He says: „*Human world is culture*“. Since a human being is born into a culture and not with it, they have to pass through processes of learning and acquiring cultural values. Therefore it is clear that the process of enculturation is practically identical with socialisation of an individual into society, at which it comes to the development of their cultural identities and civilisation as such.

However, the word culture can also have a broader meaning, when it includes whole area or set of meanings, by means of which people of certain society understand each other and the world, in which they live. Here, we may involve language and scholarship, experience and techniques, religion, art or the field of science.

Sociologists say that culture is an inseparable part, feature and attribute of a society. It originates together with the society and thus the society develops due to it, whereas with the decline of the society there comes to disappearance of the culture. The culture is thus something that is shared by all members of the given group and that is transferred from older generations to the younger ones. It is the basis of interpersonal relationships; it influences behaviour of people and communication among them. The culture is a manifestation of us; it has its own features – values, opinions, attitudes or norms, which provide it with a unique character that distinguishes it from other cultures.

Therefore, from sociological perspective we may say following:

1. In culture there are fundamental activities of people, or better to say values and rules, norms that regulate these activities; exerted procedures, or other circumstances and conditions of activities;
2. Culture is not inborn, inherited or instinctive, but it is social, learnt, educated;
3. Culture as a unit is a collective product that is created in social interactions of people;
4. Cultural norms and values are passed on from generation to generation, culture as a unit keeps certain continuity over the time, even though individual parts of culture can arise and fade out from time to time;
5. Culture is adaptable, thus it is able to adjust to internal and external changes on the basis of activities of a human being (Búzik-Sopóci, 1995, pp. 29-33).

Communication is closely related to culture. Cultural parts or values are spread mainly by means of communication; simultaneously at the sole process of communication there comes to the exchange of cultural contents. Here, we identify with the media theorist D. McQuail (1999, pp.119), who considers exactly communication to be the most elementary feature of culture. Ways, with which cultural contents were spread in the framework of communication, have gradually developed together with the sole form of communication – from verbal manifestation, through written one up to current media that brought along culture of homogeneous type – aimed at a large amount of people. It is one of subsystems of culture – the so-called *mass culture*. Apart from mass culture, other subsystems include *popular or media culture*. It is right the more detailed issue of mass and popular cultures, signs, their characteristics and definition that makes the core of this paper and we will deal with it in the following chapters.

## 2 Mass culture

If we mentioned difficulties of exact definition of the term culture in the above part, similarly, even in a more diffuse way it is operated with the terms mass or popular culture in specialized literature or in practice. Sometimes it can even happen that these terms are mutually confused, or their mutual delimitation is not sufficiently defined and restricted. Why does it come to confusion of these terms? Terminological problems in unambiguous delimitation of the terms mass and popular culture are probably caused by the fact that in the description of both terms there is emphasized primarily extensive characteristics of their users – in Anthological dictionary under the entry popular culture there is denoted following „culture shared by wide layers of population“, in the Dictionary of Media Communication mass culture is characterized as „culture created for mass audiences“. In several cases it comes to a complete interconnection of these terms, which naturally is not correct (Rusnák, 2011, pp. 53).

Individual differences between mass and popular cultures may be seen especially in the analysis of way of their usage by the audience. A. Kloskowska in her work *Mass Culture* (critic and defence) states that mass culture was born as a secondary product of industrial revolutions together with industrialisation and urbanisation and she reminds of two important criteria that delimit it – criterion of quantification and criterion of standardisation. In the meaning that is accepted most generally, according to her the term mass culture relates to current communication of identical or similar contents, stemming from a small amount of sources to large masses of recipients, as well as monolithic forms of a game or entertainment of large masses of people. The author also states that production of mass culture enabled origin of secondary mass audience that consumes contents by means of mass media (Kloskowska, 1967, pp. 68 – 70). We agree with I. Reifová, who adds that mass culture keeps its characteristic features – it is homogenised, commercialised and those for whom it is designed do not participate in its production (Reifová et al., 2004, pp. 113). In general we can say that mass culture is specific mainly from the perspective of its aesthetic parameters, target group of consumers and way of usual production and distribution. In the course of the 20th century mass culture reached two highlights: in 1920th (development of radio and film) and in 1950th (spread of television). To several of typical products of mass culture can be included folk novels, popular music, comics, TV series, commercial films, cheap reproductions of creative art works or decorative utility subjects and the like.

G. Lipovetsky (1999, pp. 62) in his publication *Soumrak povinnosti* (*Dusk of Duty*) in the context of cycle of mass production and consumption says that a decisive and important role is played mainly by advertising – by means of it there is sold and also consumed. Besides consumption and satisfaction of needs, with advertising there are created new needs, there arises new life feeling, new mentality, and new culture – culture of consumption. In this culture civilisation does not suppress the needs, but it escalates them and absolves from guilt. At the beginning of the 19th century there were first attempts to classify different cultural levels and to describe the phenomenon of pseudo art. American journalist and critic Will Irwin used for the first time the terms „lowbrow“ (an uneducated) and „highbrow“ (an intellectual) in a series of articles published in the newspaper *New York Sun*. Reflections on cultural levels and kitsch were deepened by a well-known American journalist and critic D. MacDonald, who says that mass culture is goods meant for mass consumption, which appeared by misshaping and simplifying of works from highbrow culture and folk art. Simplicity, naturalness and local availability of folk culture were replaced by trivialness, global spread and prefabrication of mass culture that only misuses needs of the masses and serves for accumulation of profit. MacDonald also spreads concepts highbrow and lowbrow with a category midcult (middle culture – culture of middle classes) (MacDonald, 1953, pp. 13-15). In this context sometimes it is said about a rule of three low – middle – high culture, whereas mass culture is low. Mass culture comes with the growth of free time and relatively good standard

of living. While these assumptions of mass culture were not provided, cultural life of people was at a very low level. Thus mass culture did not fill the place of a higher culture, but it replaced the absence of culture. It was determined for people who do not have either emotional or intellectual capabilities to be receiving high culture. However, we cannot say that mass culture evades works of high culture. It brings them along in condensed and averaged form, in neutralising contexts. Although valuable works belonging into high culture get by means of mass media to the audience only in limited extent, it is the only way how higher values can get to these recipients. If mass media did not exist, higher culture would not get to these recipients at all. Nevertheless, it is necessary to remind of the fact that in our times of a developed system of mass communication there exist mass media and programmes that purposefully and systematically focus on quality culture that can satisfy demanding and educated audience (Rankov, 2002, pp. 41-42).

A. Kloskowska points out that mass culture involves also components of high cultural level and in this culture they mix up, join and dissolve with components from other levels. She defines this process as homogenisation of mass culture, in which there comes to fading out of distances and differences among different products of various levels of culture (Kloskowska, 1967, pp. 223). We agree with H. Arendt, who pertinently emphasises the difference among subjects of individual cultures. Therefore, division of culture into mass (low) and elite (high) one is an excellent tool to distinguish quality of individual works. The subject of culture is characterised by permanence of values and relative stability, whereas the main signs of the mass culture works are modernity and novelty, therefore the culture cannot be consumed, however mass culture can. In mass culture it is valid that one goods is replaced by another one, which is in other cultures practically impossible (Arendt, 1994, pp. 127).

It is obvious that the dissemination of mass culture is closely related to the development and use of mass communication means, together with the development of reproduction techniques and technologies. From sociological viewpoint, the research of mass culture started at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, while it was being examined as a function of certain type of society and its needs. It may be reminded that in sociology the term mass culture is used neutrally in terms of value. However, sometimes this term is value-biased, when mass culture is characterised in antithesis to so-called high – elite - culture. It is namely justified to state that development of mass culture to some extent limits or deforms individual cultural needs and manifestations and it supports development of less demanding genres and contents.

Generally speaking, in theoretical reflection it is possible to delimit three fundamental approaches to the conditions of mass culture origin, as follows:

1. Mass culture is a typical product of mass society, which appeared as a secondary consequence of the impact of industrial revolution, industrialisation, urbanisation and mass media (Antonina Kloskowska and Hannah Arendt).
2. Mass culture filled the space after folk culture, which it gradually pushes to the margin (Dwight McDonald).
3. Another approach attributes a key role solely to the impact of mass media and non-critical adjusting of authors of media products to average or low taste of the audience (Umberto Eco).

The above mentioned approaches have a common denominator, which includes critical outcomes related to the consequences of the impact of mass culture. In the process of production and reception of mass culture contents there comes to physical separation of authors from their recipients, whereas mass produced culture grades values, withdraws or even destroys individuality and creativity, supports averageness of an individual and degrades taste. It often happens that under the influence of mass culture and utility way to its reception, people become lethargic, unprincipled to their neighbourhood; willing - in the name of their utility and hedonic ideal - to tolerate

negative phenomena in the society (e.g. violence on the helpless, injustice, military aggressions, promiscuity, alcoholism, drug addiction, etc.). Mass culture grades values of the so-called high culture, while it permanently comes to a fusion between high and low arts, whereas there shade away uniqueness and autonomy or originality of genuine works of art. Unique production was replaced by mass culture, reacting to mentality and needs of the audience. Cultural industry producing mass culture supports the process of homogenisation of objects of art. Unique production was replaced by mass production, reacting to mentality and grading by generalising cultural production and shifting it to the level of market relations, which are set by price of individual cultural commodities. Cultural contents in the society, in which there dominates mass culture, have become goods.

The „Frankfurt School“ is a term with which we denote a group of intellectuals from the Institute for Social Research, which was established in 1923 in Frankfurt on the Main. Founders of the Frankfurter School were philosophers and sociologists Max Horkheimer (1895-1973) and Theodor W. Adorno (1903-1969), who elaborated first critical theory on functions and functioning of mass culture. On the basis of their own analysis of mass culture they consider mass media as one of the key parts of maintaining social economic and political relationships in the modern capitalistic society. In it, mass media are a component part of a commercial market circle of offer and demand and they bring along cultural values as goods and culture supported by advertising. They say that mass culture is a product of industrial production. This critical reflection of mass culture is denoted by the term cultural industry. At present, there is much more used the term entertainment industry (show business), which however does not change anything in the basis of the criticised phenomenon (Rankov, 2002, p. 40). A key tool of cultural industry is commodity. Thus commodities are cultural products that entered into market mechanisms and have become goods. Representatives of the Frankfurter School say that by means of cultural industry the society has overmastered an individual using advertising and mass communication, therefore the term cultural industry is not compatible with the term mass culture. These critics perceived mass culture in a positive way, as a culture of masses „from the bottom“ (form of folk culture). While this culture reflects traditional values, is a manifestation of individual creativity and stands in opposition to the industry, cultural industry is a „controlled culture from the above“ and its aim is ideological impact and social control (Plencner, 2005, pp. 191). Basic features of mass culture are as follows:

- It is not traditional (not connected with a territory, not designed for closed communities);
- It is not elite;
- It is produced in a mass way (mass production and distribution of cultural contents);
- It is commercialized (focused on profit);
- It is standardised (it uses time-proved methods of production, simple aesthetic schemes and attractive effects, repeating plots and stereotyped characters);
- It is homogenised;
- It incites to mass behaviour.

### 3 Popular culture

The times after the World War II bring a new insight on mass media and mass popular culture, which originated in the USA and gradually penetrated into other countries and societies. Due to popularity and relatively easy availability, it started to be perceived as a culture designed for elite audience and not only as a culture mass produced for masses of people. The endeavour for fun and phenomenon of free time has become the main part of popular culture – pop culture. Etymological meaning of the word comes from the Latin word *populus*, which means people. In broad sense of word we may thus talk about certain community, which is united into certain group. Although the term „people“ is an abstract category, in this context we may claim about the community that its members behave as one organism in specific situations, they have certain common needs,

desires, ideas and values. In this original Latin understanding is thus popular something what is favourite for people, generally known or aimed at people.

According to A. Giddens (2000, pp. 360) popular culture is defined as a „form of entertainment, which is watched, read or attended by hundreds of thousands or *even millions of people*“. It is also denoted as a culture that makes a statement on real life of ordinary people, or folk culture of a modern society. We also identify with the theory of DeFleur-Dennis (1998, pp. 283), who understand popular culture as „*mass communicated messages with limited intellectual and aesthetic demands and content that is proposed for entertainment and distraction of media audience*“. It often comes to the shortening of the term popular culture into the form pop-culture; both terms are identical as far as the meaning is concerned. The object of popularity (favour) thus can be people, opinions, subjects or activities. However, popular culture or popularity cannot be automatically connected with mass audience, as it was by mass culture. Consumers of pop culture can be divided into two groups according to who is involved, as follows:

1. Huge amount of people, wide population, masses - mainstream
2. Smaller amount of people, minority audience – sub-stream

In this context Z. Slušná mentions an important media theorist J. Fiske, who in his work Understanding Popular Culture states that popular culture – sphere whose basis and determinant is popularity, lives due to activity of subjects. This connection of reflection of pop-culture with the reception of an activity both intellectual and sensual at the same time has brought along second wind into the research of popular phenomena. It may be unambiguously stated that cultural production meant for public reception usually takes into account taste, interests and attitudes of receivers by means of the attribute of „pretty-pannedness“. Pop-culture is a specific cultural sphere that on the basis of its inner flexibility and dynamics enables self-expression and self-presentation to groups and communities, which exist in different positions inside the official culture, but through their picture of the world, are not in absolute contrast with it. (Slušná, 2012, pp. 3)

A. Plencner says that if a group is united by popularity of common objects, such a group creates „subculture“ (Plencner, 2005, pp. 196). Theorist of communication technologies and media D. McQuail (1999, p. 127-128) denotes popular culture as „*the most widely spread symbolical culture of our times*“. Here, we can remind of the fact that pop culture has more sources. The basic ones include institutions specialized in production and dissemination of cultural material (music industry, radio, television and film companies, publishers of books etc.). A specific source includes specialized communities that spread different facts and information and seek to clearly interpret them (news providing media, scholars etc.). In these cases popularisation has a function of making specialized information available to laics. V. Gažová (2003, pp. 29-31) adds club activity to the sources of popular culture. Within it, it may be said that „club culture“ deals with a specific group interest and focuses on common programme. Here, we include mainly various free time activities and hobbies.

In the context of popular culture we may also mention the term *idol* – an important component of popular culture. It is a person who has become popular among the audience. Role models are most often preferred by children or teenagers; here we mean famous actors, music bands or sportspeople. The audience admire their idols, they perceive them as role models and very often they identify with them. We may also mention idol as gainful employment – different understudies of film stars or imitators of famous musicians and singers. L. Gogová says that pop culture is a product of industrial revolution and it is also a part of market cycle of offer and demand. Mass produced commodities have become an entity, which was used by the audience in order to distract or entertain, whereas entertainment has transformed to one of the priority goods determined for consumption of a consumer (2013, pp.41).

In the 1970s there came to a theoretical turn in the field of research of culture and mass media. The fundamental development of critical cultural theory was brought along by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, which was founded in 1964 in Birmingham. Social and cultural approach that was asserted by the director of the Centre - theorist of culture and sociologist Stuart Hall (1932) – became known as „Birmingham School“. It was right Stuart Hall, who helped to distinctly distinguish mass and popular cultures. According to him popular culture developed from folk culture, which however cannot be said about mass culture. He considered the latter to be „corrupted“ popular culture (Jiráč-Köpplová, 2003, pp. 107). In this connection D. McQuail again reminds of the most important American defender of popular culture – John Fiske. According to him popular culture is culture of people. He says that popularity is a measure of into what extent a given form of culture can satisfy desires of its consumers. In addition, he says that if a cultural commodity is to be successful, it must suit at the same time the interests of people, among which it is popular, but also the interests of its producers (McQuail, 1999, pp. 128).

We may talk about the origin of popular culture in the second half of the 19th century. It was determined by urbanisation and technological progress. It is not rare that mass and popular cultures are perceived as counterparts. By popular culture we may emphasize succession to older folk culture, closer contact among its authors and users. Popular culture is a result of mutual discussion among mass media and cultural producers on the one side and consumers on the other side on what they will produce. Popular culture unlike mass culture cannot be made beforehand; popular culture must become popular among the audience on its own. It happens in a way that people start to like, adapt or reshape (make popular) certain cultural products (made by cultural industry) or activities. One of the most striking differences is that mass culture is made for the audience, but without cooperation of the audience. In popular culture, on the contrary, it is counted on the audience as a co-creator. Therefore popular culture is understood as „favourite culture“.

J. Malíček (2012, pp. 17-18) in his publication *Popkultúra: návod na použitie (Pop culture: guidebook for use)* mentions individual differences between mass and popular cultures. Mass culture is culture of the mass and it communicates quantity, unlike pop culture, which due to the word pop expresses something quality. It unambiguously results that the terms mass and popular are not synonyms. Mass culture is the object of passive reception (accepting) and pop culture is perceived by active subjects. Mass culture denotes a wide spectrum of events and phenomena, about which we can however say only that they are mass. On the contrary, pop culture devotes only to such phenomena that are to some extent popular. If we want to express the relationship of these two cultures in mutual interaction, we may state that mass culture can be to some extent also pop culture. However, pop culture is never automatically mass culture. It is only that part of the mass culture, which the receiver picks up on the basis of focused interest. Besides J. Malíček the most famous Slovak authors and researchers of this issue involve also Viera Gažová, Erich Mistrík, Vincent Šabík or Pavol Rankov, who develop issues of popular culture in the frameworks of culturology, aesthetics and mass media studies.

Here, we may also mention the fact that component parts of popular culture are forms that are not products of mass media, for example new dance steps, hair-cuts, games, fashionable clothes and accessories or other subjects of ordinary consumption. Popularity is a dynamic phenomenon that disturbs static model of high and low cultures; therefore it can reach work of any cultural level (highbrow, lowbrow, middlebrow) regardless its inner qualities. Another option is that certain work is made popular at another level than it originally appeared (Eco, 1995, pp. 60-63).

We agree with H. Pravdová (2011, pp. 22), according to whom popular culture bounds upon individual approaches and assumes the ability of receivers to form their own meanings, which reflect

their needs and are different from the dominant mainstream meaning and values. She understands popularity as an indicator of potential of a cultural product and proves that given media content suits needs of its receivers. If any cultural product is to become popular, it must satisfy needs and various interest of addressees, for whom it is determined. However, H. Pravdová (2009, pp. 28) in her publication *Determinanty kreovania mediálnej kultúry (Determinants of creating media culture)* points out the fact that mass and popular cultures are necessary to be distinguished in the production of mass media. Nevertheless, at the same time this differentiation cannot be strict, since both cultures are mutually determined and have an identical tendency to standardisation and commercialisation. Both cultures are substantially related to the production of media contents and messages, as well as to the way of their reception and interpretation, while they in a fundamental way determine manifestations of media production of culture and social cultural reality.

Fundamental signs of popular culture are as follows:

- it is created also by its users;
- it serves to interests of manifold subjects;
- it is polysemous;
- it is inter-textual;
- it brings along pleasure;
- it is the source of socially relevant meanings.

### Conclusion

The paper is focused on theoretical reflection of mass and popular cultures. In the introduction the author presented the term culture and its scope in general. The core of the paper consists of chapters on mass and popular cultures, where the author presented basic definition frameworks to the terms, their signs, ways of production and other specifics. One of the most differential attributes of submitted subcultures is that products and contents of mass culture are produced by mass media and by media or creative authors. Although it is meant for masses, however in production only the preferences of the audience are important. On the contrary, popular culture is made by the sole audience and users of cultural products. Popular culture cannot be created in advance; it must become popular on its own. The paper provides receivers with a more detailed overview on these subcultures, their origins, authors and tendencies, which cooperated in their production and development from the culturological, mediological and sociological perspectives.

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