Culturescope Resources: Popular Culture

The Nature of Popular Culture
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The aim of this article is to assist students and teachers in understanding Popular Culture. It offers a suggestion how to open up Popular Culture to allow the students to communicate their interactions using the concepts.

The syllabus tells us that "the focus of this study is the interconnection between the individual and popular culture." Our students have a wealth of knowledge of popular cultures but frequently it is framed in colloquialisms and jargon. The challenge for us as teachers is to allow our students to "examine their interactions" theoretically through the concepts without stifling their passions and enthusiasm. This is an presentation that I have used with my students as an introduction to Popular Culture. It involves a degree of honesty for the teacher that I feel only Society and Culture allows. I usually punctuate my presentation with music that generally makes the students roar with laughter. My particular favourite at the moment is "Teenage Kicks" by the Undertones.

The structure of the lesson

The first task for the student is to have a working definition of what constitutes a popular culture. Fortunately the Board of Studies provides us with checklist to assess whether or not our chosen topic is indeed a popular culture.

* Identifying the distinguishing characteristics of popular culture as:
  - being associated with commercial products
  - developing from a local to a national to a global level
  - allowing consumers to have widespread access to it
  - constantly changing and evolving

Secondly the student must identify a topic or interest and work through the checklist to determine if it is a popular culture.

* Examining their own interaction with popular culture

If their example conforms to the Board of Studies framework students are then able to examine their own interconnections and interactions using the fundamental concepts of society, culture, persons, environment, time and the concepts of power, authority, gender and technology.

The nature of the student's interactions (e.g. contact, acceptance and rejection) is based upon their experiences, feelings and socialisation. Each student has a unique experience of popular culture. The challenge is to draw this out using the concepts. I believe the best way to do this is for the teacher to present their own
interactions with popular culture to the students.

The presentation

Mr Smith's interactions with popular culture.

1 Popular Music (Punk Rock) and the Board of Studies checklist

being associated with commercial products

- CD's ("Never Mind the Bollocks," "Damned, Damned, Damned," clothes, books, videos, movies ("Sid and Nancy," "The Filth and the Fury.")

developing from a local to a national to a global level

- It began in London with The Damned and the Sex Pistols. The bands then toured the UK receiving national exposure via TV (the Today Show, the music press such as NME, Melody Maker).

allowing consumers to have widespread access to it

- Initially the records were available only on mail order, but the Sex Pistols signed to a major label," Virgin." This meant widespread distribution and exposure eventually leading to TV appearances on US TV and a US Tour. Today access is almost unlimited due to the internet (band websites, file sharing sites).

constantly changing and evolving

- Punk began as a response to heavy metal and indulgent guitar solos of the stadium rock of bands like Earth, Wind and Fire, Genesis, Led Zeppelin. At first it was fashion free but in its first 12 months (1976 to 1977) punks began to adopt ripped clothes and spiky hair to mimic Johnny Rotten and Sid Vicious of the Sex Pistols. Nowadays Green Day may spike their hair, as do the Offspring but the music is a lot more commercial. Guitar playing is taken more serious, as are the lyrics. Punk in 1976 was loud, raw and adolescent. Now punk rockers grow grey beards and produce other people's records and are part of the musical establishment. There is old school, new school, skatey and surfy punk to name but a few derivatives of the genre.

2 My interactions with popular culture (Punk Rock) using the concepts.

My environment was Newcastle, England. This was a working class community in the North of England. My micro society was composed of Seaton Burn Community College (school), my family and friends. All of my friends in the early 1980's were from my council estate. A number of my friends were unemployed and almost all of them who worked were poorly paid and had few prospects. A few of us unsuccessfuily attempted Year 11, but we rarely attended and were more interested in life outside of school. I like so many others was asked to leave as I was unwilling to accept the power and authority of school.

Our culture was typical of other working class communities in the North of England. Humour was very savage and reflected the perceived grimness of many of our experiences. In other words we laughed at our own misfortune. Important values in our community were collectivism and aggression. My friends and I rejected much of the conformism of our community because to us it meant losing our sense of self. We
hated the music of the early eighties (e.g. Wham and songs like "Live Forever" recently recycled in "O.C."). Some of our friends embraced the dominant popular culture of the time (e.g. tipped hair, bright coloured clothes, the Newcastle night scene and its terrible dance clubs). We rejected this. We sought an alternative scene to allow us to express our individuality and identity. One or two of our friends had been punks since the late 1970's so it was a natural progression to embrace their exciting fashions, music and the lifestyle.

Access was easy for us. Punk music was available in HMV, Virgin and all major department stores. The media provided us with much of our diet. On TV we had Bliss and the Tube, excellent cutting edge music shows that promoted punk and alternative music. There were a number of Punk pubs and clubs in the early Eighties in Newcastle. They were the Barley Mow, The Baltic Tavern, The Riverside and the Mayfair. We frequented all of them drinking snakebites and generally getting in to mischief. Our nights often culminated in conflict with power and authority figures such as the police, our parents and the landlords of public houses supported by their security teams. There was a real thriving local scene in Newcastle. However there were frequent national festivals (Glastonbury, Reading) and plenty of international influences such as the Dead Kennedy's.

The mythology of punk drew us in. We willingly accepted Sid Vicious and Jello Biafra as role models. Their nonconformity and rejection of power and authority figures became our inspiration. The early death of Sid Vicious and his "eternal youth" evoked other mythological icons such as James Dean, Marilyn Monroe and many others. Their mystique and continuity was ensured by the fact that they never got old and grey. They defied conformity to the ends of their short lives. We lived by their code of live for today hoping to cheat old age to.

We were attracted to punk girls because of their black eye liner, pale faces and their rejection of gender roles and norms. Siouxsie of the Banshees was their inspiration. She could out drink the men and she literally spat in the face of conventional norms of attractiveness. She even left her underarms unshaven! Women took the initiative and liked men who were tall and slim, had spiky hair and lots of attitude. We were expected to be able to fight and to "pogo" on the dance floor (these were pretty much the same thing!) We longed to be accepted by these exciting, mysterious creatures.

Our ideology was anti-government, anti-religion and anti-power and authority. Institutions and institutional power were for us the "lengthened shadow of one individual" (Prime Ministers, Presidents and corporations). I was particularly attracted to the "class warrior" performers such as Spear of Destiny, Billy Bragg and the Redskins. My friends preferred the anarchists such as Crass and the acculturation of the American Dead Kennedy's. Our politics were anarchist and communist/socialist and punk music led me to the Socialist Workers Party. The Redskins lyrics reverberated with the mythology of glorious historic struggles and seizures of power by the mighty workers. The music was loud and aggressive. Acceptance was easy as punk matched our feelings of youthful confusion and anger. These political
movements offered answers and allowed us to channel our anger into social and political change. Our music now defined us as "political animals."

The punk movement had changed as it reflected resistance to the government of the day. The bitter miner's strike of 1983 to 1984 saw some of my friend's dads fight police on a picket line, while we sung lyrics celebrating the glory of the class war. ("Billy Elliot" is a movie set in the North of England at this time). Punk had become politicised, as we had. The clash of cultures in Britain pitted socialism against the New Right. Communities versus individualism. The lyrics of our songs defined their struggle and ours. "We've got to get this situation sorted out," and "Levi Stubbs Tears" willed us on to confront and conflict with the institutions of power.

The dynamic interaction between environment, time, society and culture had forced us to re-evaluate our responses to power and authority and gender. Indeed this process of enculturation saw some of us even accept or reject punk music itself.

Only one of my friends is still a punk today. He still attends tattoo conventions but his mortgage and marriage suggest that he has accepted more of the system than perhaps he'd like to admit. His twin brother lives a James Dean life, steeped in his own mythology. Reality and fiction are very blurred for him as popular culture has become more real than life. As for the rest of the guys I unfortunately lost touch with a lot of them when I left the North East of England to attend college. The punk revival in Brixton in 1992 was probably the last time most of us spiked our hair. But like me I bet they still live the rebellion every time they hear punk on the radio or see it on TV.

The institutions of power today have absorbed punk. Multi-nationals control much of the music industry and their globalised media networks determine access. Youth culture is quickly marketed and re-packaged. Nothing escapes this "lengthened shadow." But punk and alternative music has its own heartbeat and independence. Punk music gave me an insight in to politics and non-conformism beyond my micro and in to the macro world. The Redskins inspired my life long commitment to social justice. "Pretty Vacant" and "Anarchy in the UK" remind me that there is more to life than work, mortgages and family. My socialisation process was and is still shaken by those years of adventure, hedonism and conflict. My attitude to power and authority is still best summed up by "Keep on Keepin' on it!" My music weaves a thread of continuity that knits youth and maturity.

It was all a bit of fun really. We only really spiked our hair on weekends and nights out. But it was real to us.