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Burgin- Section A

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Popular Culture’s Effect on Personal Identification

Pop culture is everywhere around us. It is apparent in fashion, sports, television, radio, gastronomy, books, and so many other aspects of our everyday lives. Since, popular culture is such a large presence in peoples’ lives, it becomes important to determine its effect on people especially in the sense of how it impacts their identity and how they define themselves. The two sides of this question both settle on polar opposites from each other with one side arguing that people are defined by what they like and popular culture, and the other side arguing that what people like does not define them. Although both sides have good points about what truly defines a person, an examination of both of these opposing thoughts will show that popular culture plays a crucial role in people’s major occupations and relationships in life, the multiplicity of popular culture means that groups within specific genres will not be defined the same way, and that there are many different mediums of popular culture, not just one, that take part in the shaping one’s personal identity. Pulling ideas and arguments from both sides, it can be deduced that people’s definition of themselves is an ever-changing phenomenon shaped by a variety of influences and experiences and since popular culture is an aspect of peoples’ everyday lives and experiences, popular culture is one of the ways in which peoples’ identities are formed.

The argument that most people are not truly defined by what they like and that popular culture’s effect on identity has been exaggerated is articulated by Gary Westfahl in his essay “Ways of Defining Personal Identity, and Popular Culture: Two (Largely) Unrelated Subjects”. He opens with an extreme case of popular culture influencing a woman’s life through her obsessive collection of more than 2,700 paraphernalia relating to Mickey Mouse. He does this as a concession in saying that while there are people who exist who are largely defined by what they like and pop culture, the fact that they attract so much media attention means that these people are only representative of a very small portion of the population. After discussing the “exceptions to the rule”, Westfahl moves on to supporting his argument that popular culture does not play a role in personal identification by describing what he defines as how people generally define themselves. He uses an obituary as a representation of how people are defined because the purpose of the obituary is to embody the important things about a person and their life. Things that are most commonly brought up in an obituary include when and where the person was born, their educational background, their work experience, the names of their spouses, siblings, children, and grandchildren; membership in organizations, and date and place of death. Westfahl argues that these obituaries rarely mention what kinds of things people liked in terms of movies, sport teams, novels, and other facets of popular culture. Therefore, Westfahl makes the point that people are not defined by what they liked in life, but rather what they did of importance and who they spent time and built relationships with. He then continues this thought when he explains that the information people usually share with each other when they first meet includes things like (if these people are college students) what they are studying. Westfahl reasons that since what people like are not customarily mentioned in certain instances where people are defined, whether in an obituary or a first conversation with someone, what people like is not a determining way in which people define themselves.

Westfahl’s discussion of how people are defined and how they define themselves is a critical part of his argument because by showing that people don’t use what they like as a part of their personal identification, he effectively demonstrates that this isn’t a large part of how people are shaped. He uses obituaries as a way to show an instance of personal definition that usually excludes mention of what people liked in life and instead talks about what they did with their life in terms of education, work, and relationships. However, what Westfahl fails to mention is how what that person liked in life influenced these bigger more “life-defining moments” of education, work, and relationships. Popular culture has the potential to dramatically shape people subtly because popular culture can inspire people and motivate them to pursue what they are interested in. This motivation and inspiration of people can drive them towards studying certain fields or pursuing certain career paths. Furthermore, popular culture can lead to connections between people in terms of similar interests in certain popular culture works. These connections between people can forge relationships, which is another way in which people are defined according to Westfahl. Thus, what Westfahl categorizes to be personal definitions may not be explicitly popular culture, but they can be influenced by popular culture.

Westfahl continues his argument with the point that fans of similar popular culture works tend to lack consensus on various topics such as religion and politics. He uses several examples to show the lack of unity in peoples’ opinions on these topics despite their similar interests in certain venues of popular culture. He articulates his reasoning for doing so when he states, “For while forms of popular culture may be variegated in some respects, they each share certain characteristics that attract followers; and if popular culture is indeed defining identity, those shared characteristics should arguably inculcate similarities in all aspects of one's personality, including political beliefs, religious beliefs, and preferences in leisure activities” (Westfahl). One of these examples was a survey given to various science fiction writers and editors regarding whether or not they supported the participation of the United States in the war that was going on at the time in Vietnam. Even though all these people were linked by a common interest in the science fiction genre, they showed considerable disunity in their opinions in the war with forty-seven percent voting in support of the involvement of the United States in the Vietnam War and fifty-three percent voting against it. Westfahl argues that since there was such disharmony in their political beliefs despite their shared connection in science fiction, popular culture does not define people and what people like does not affect their views and beliefs on important topics.

While Westfahl may have effectively shown through his examples that common interest does not necessarily mean unity in thought on certain contemporary issues, this does not necessarily mean that popular culture does not have an effect on peoples’ viewpoints. He used science fiction as one example to show lack of consensus within this genre’s followers towards involvement of the United States in the Vietnam War. However, what Westfahl fails to include is the vast multiplicity of the science fiction genre. This genre includes thousands of books, television shows, and movies. While these science fiction mediums may have a common thread, they represent many different ideas and themes. Therefore, people who enjoy science fiction and are fans of this genre have probably had different experiences with the genre and haven’t explored all the exact same texts. Every consumer of these mediums also has a different experience with them and takes away different things, so even if two science fiction junkies are watching the same movie, they are not going to have the same exact experience. Furthermore, even if someone is a fan of science fiction, this isn’t the only form of popular culture that may be a part of his or her life. They could be involved in multiple facets of popular culture and draw certain defining characteristics from a vast array of places. People are defined from a wide array of experiences and they can pull fragments of ideas and themes from a huge resource of popular culture in order to piece together their identity. This means that even if people are involved and interested in a certain genre of popular culture, this group isn’t going to be necessarily similar in view points because people are uniquely defined by pop culture, and they draw their personal identities from multiple sources; not from just that one genre.

Contrary to Westfahl, the author Brian Cogan in his essay “Pop Culture and Individual Identity” argues that popular culture is central to personal identification as well as to socialization with like-minded fans. Cogan supports his argument using fandom, straight edge, and sports as the focal points for his observance of popular culture being a large part of a person’s identification. He shows that within these vessels of popular culture are groups of people that take their respective kind of pop culture that they like very seriously and it has profound impacts on their life, their actions, their ideology, and thus their personal definition. Cogan emphasizes the importance of popular culture on personal definition when he states, “While sports fans may be more mainstream in some ways than science fiction fans or punks, all three share the commonality of a shared system of beliefs and meaning, provided by popular culture”(Cogan). Cogan argues that popular culture serves as a foundation for people’s beliefs and to what they find meaningful in life. Descriptions of the phenomenon of comic cons, the contemporary movement of straight edge wherein people of this ideology adhere to it almost religiously, and of sport events taken so seriously that fights have occurred all are central points to Cogan’s argument in demonstrating instances where people define themselves using popular culture.

While Cogan uses examples well to articulate his argument and the claims he are making are convincing overall, these examples are not necessarily representative of society as a whole. Even though there does exist some sport fans that will tattoo themselves or beat up fans of opposing teams out of allegiance to their particular team of interest, this does not mean that there are many sport fans who are that fanatically obsessed with their teams. Cogan makes a good point in articulating sports as a medium that shapes personal identification, but he over-emphasized its importance in this shaping. The kind of obsession and personal identification some people associate with sports is not representative of how most people are shaped from sports. The way Cogan spoke of not only sports’ impact on peoples’ identification but also straight edge and fandom made it seem like these examples could be applied to everyone, but in reality not that many show that kind of obsession with something they like. Rather, these popular culture venues along with others come together in bits and pieces to make a framework for someone’s identity. Most people aren’t solely shaped by one great obsession, but by many of their various interests. All the various popular culture mediums that they are subjected to daily come together to incite thoughts, ideas, and inspiration in a person that ultimate shape them in the long run, but this shaping is done almost unconsciously and constantly. Cogan is right that popular culture plays a role in personal development, but he overemphasizes the role of a single kind of popular culture on a person and does not argue the role of a vast array of popular culture mediums coming together to shape a person.

Arguments have been made on both sides about whether or not what someone likes in terms of popular culture defines a person. The question should not be about whether or not popular culture plays a role in personal identification, but rather it should be about how popular culture plays this role. Popular culture is exemplified in millions of various ways, and everyone takes out something different from their experiences with pop culture. Therefore, while some people may in fact spend more time with a certain medium of popular culture, that does not mean that this certain medium is the only one that impacts and shapes this person. There are so many factors and experiences that shape a person that there cannot be one thing that can be pinpointed as the definition of a person. Rather, a person is defined through various experiences some of which are related to popular culture, and all of these experiences, beliefs, and ideologies come together to shape that person.

Works Cited

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