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## ***MEDIATRIBES — MAKING SENSE OF POPULAR CULTURE, THE MASS MEDIA, AND EVERYDAY LIFE IN AMERICA***

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ONE ADVANTAGE of keeping journals is that you have a record of your ideas as they have evolved over the years. Recently I was looking through a journal written in 1980 and noticed plans I had made for teaching a course in popular culture. It was to be called "Popular Culture in American Society."

### **Popular Culture in American Society: A Course Proposal**

The course would deal with topics such as *popular music* (rock, country-western, disco, jazz ... and now one would add rap), *comics* (Superman, Batman, The Fantastic Four, Spiderman, Dick Tracy, etc.), *advertising* (commercials on radio and television, print ads in newspapers and magazines, billboards, etc.), *television* (sitcoms, crime shows, action-adventure programs, soap operas, sports shows, news), *radio* (talk shows, interviews, news shows, top-forty music shows, dramas), *humor* (jokes, folk humor, cartoons, records), *artifacts* (Levis blue jeans, McDonald's hamburgers, Coca-Cola, hair fashions, eyeglasses, supermarkets, etc.) and various other topics, all from a multi-disciplinary and comparative perspective.

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I never taught the course, but my design offers an overview of what might be dealt with in a course on that subject — or an investigation of popular culture in America or elsewhere. What I was interested in (and still am) is all the junk that floods our airwaves, all the “significant” trivia that are part of our lives, all the rituals we observe so faithfully (seldom thinking about what we are doing) and all the institutions that are part of our everyday lives.

I’ve been teaching courses on popular culture and writing since the mid-Sixties. When I started working on popular culture it was considered a “trivial” matter, not worth bothering with, by many American academics. Now, popular culture has become a very fashionable subject, though most of the work on it is now called “cultural studies.” I’ll still be writing about popular culture next year and the year after, when the topic probably will have lost its appeal and there’s a new “hot” subject in academia — usually some subject the French or Germans were interested in a few years ago and got bored with.

### **There’s Method to My Madness**

I have found in teaching that my students find it much more interesting when I provide them with methods of analysis which they can apply to popular culture than when I lecture and offer my ideas about popular culture, in general, or some aspect of it. I sneak in an idea from time to time, but focus my attention on talking about ways of analyzing popular culture and thus empowering my students to make their own analyses.

Besides, our students at San Francisco State find it very difficult to listen to lectures on anything except sex (the biology department’s course on sex is the most popular course in the school, with 700 students every semester). Dealing with students who have an attention span of seven minutes, the time between commercials on television shows (forgive me if I exaggerate a bit) makes it necessary to engage the students in activities rather than just lecturing. With this in mind, let me suggest some approaches to popular culture (and American culture in general) that might be considered.

### **The UnCola Country**

Ferdinand de Saussure, in his *Course in General Linguistics* wrote, “Concepts are purely differential and defined not by their positive content but negatively by their relations with the other terms of the system” (1966, 117). He added, “the most precise characteristics” of these concepts “is in being what the others are not” (1966, p.117). These lines have had enor-

mous impact on western thought, for they explain how people, institutions, countries gain an identity. It's all in the differences.

With this in mind, we can understand how Americans have defined themselves. Just as Seven-Up is the "uncola," we Americans have defined ourselves as the "un-Europeans." Let me offer a set of paired oppositions which reflect how Americans have seen themselves for the past 100 years or so, relative to Europe (and perhaps other countries as well). I'm not arguing that our view of ourselves is correct, by any means — but that we have defined ourselves by being "what others are not."

Nature-Culture Polarity in the American Mind

<i>Nature</i>	<i>Culture</i>
America	Europe
Cowboy	Cavalier
The Frontier	Institutions (Church, Nobility)
Natural Law	Custom
Freedom	Despotism
Innocence	Guilt
Hope	Memory
Willpower	Class Conflict
Individualism	Conformity
Agrarianism	Industrialism
Clean Living	Sensuality
Achievement	Ascription
Action	Theory
Equality	Hierarchy
Classless Society	Class-Bound Society
Nature Foods	Gourmet Cooking
The Sacred	The Profane

Emerson's poem, "America, My Country," reflects this polarity and notion that Americans are different; it also explicitly contrasts America with Europe.

*America, My Country*

Land without history, land lying all  
 In the play of daylight of the temperate zone,  
 Thy plain acts  
 Without exaggeration done in day;  
 Thy interests contested by their manifold good sense,  
 In their own clothes without the ornament  
 Of bannered army harnesses in uniform.

Land where — and 'tis in Europe counted a reproach —  
 Where man asks questions for which man was made.  
 A land without nobility, or wigs, or debt,  
 No castles, no cathedrals, and no kings;  
 Land of the forest.

America is certainly no longer without debt or wigs, even though we still think we are, in essence, in a state of nature and therefore “without history.” (We probably employ half the historians alive in our universities, but most of them are there to study other societies, with a great deal of history.) It is an interesting exercise to offer a few terms in this polarity and ask students who have studied American history and culture to add terms to the list.

### The Onion of Culture Metaphor

One activity that my students find interesting, and challenging, involves tracing myths through culture. I got this idea from Mircea Eliade who wrote in *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*, “Certain mythical themes still survive in modern societies, but are not readily recognizable since they have undergone a long process of laicization.” (1967, p.28)

I suggest that it is possible to conceive of cultures as being like onions. We can peel away strips and find, at the center of things, myths that shape and inform American culture and society, at various levels. We would find the following:

#### The Myth Model

*A Myth* (a sacred story)

*Historical* events that relate to this myth

*Elite Art* works connected to this myth

*Popular Art* works related to this myth

*Everyday Life* activities that reflect this myth

As an example, I take the myth of Adam in the Garden in a state of innocence before the Fall. The concept that is significant here is that nature and innocence are connected. For historical events, I take the movement of the Puritans to America, an escape from European decadence (and history) to nature, where the Puritans could establish a City on a Hill, a perfect society, etc. You also could take our numerous utopian communities. In elite art, we find the “American Adam” figure, an innocent who generally comes to grief at the hands of corrupt Europeans. In popular culture, we

have Westerns (in which cowboys have to "clean up" towns so they can regain their lost innocence) and science fiction stories that deal with ridding new worlds of villains and villainesses of one sort or another. And in everyday life, we have the movement to the suburbs where children will be able to "fall on grass" and not hard, urban cement.

I find that when I ask students to undertake this activity, they've been able to take myths such as "David and Goliath," "Icarus," "Samson and Delilah," "Oedipus," and so on and find numerous reflections of these myths at all levels of the myth model. (I put students into groups of three and give them a half hour to run some myth through the "myth model." Then we discuss the myths, look for other examples at the various levels, and so on.)

### The Four Political Cultures

In this approach to American culture, I use the ideas of Aaron Wildavsky, who was until his untimely death some years ago, a professor of political science at the University of California in Berkeley. Wildavsky wrote, in his essay "A Cultural Theory of Preference Formation" (Berger, 1989, p.25):

The dimensions of cultural theory are based on answers to two questions: Who am I? and What shall I do? The question of identity may be answered by saying that individuals [may] belong to a strong group, a collective that makes decisions binding on all members or that their ties to others are weak in that their choices are binding only on themselves. The question of action is answered by responding that the individual is subject to many or few prescriptions, a free spirit or a spirit tightly constrained. The strength or weakness of group boundaries and the numerous or few, varied or similar prescriptions binding or freeing individuals are the components of their culture.

These considerations yield four political cultures:

*hierarchical elitists* (strong boundaries, numerous prescriptions),  
*fatalists* (weak boundaries, numerous prescriptions),  
*egalitarians* (strong boundaries, few prescriptions) and  
*individualists* (weak boundaries, few prescriptions).

(In later years Wildavsky isolated a fifth political culture but it is so small as to be irrelevant to our concerns.)

Each of these political cultures holds certain ideas about matters such as risk, blame, ostentation, and so on, and all are necessary to maintain a democracy. It is also possible, Wildavsky adds, for individuals to move from one political culture to another if they are not getting "payoff." If we as-

sume that individuals wish to avoid cognitive dissonance and wish to have their values reinforced, it is possible to argue that there are, in America (and in any democratic society) four audiences, and that individuals seek out, not necessarily being conscious of what they are doing, songs, films, television programs, books, games, and other aspect of popular culture that are congruent with their particular political culture.

I explain Wildavsky's theory to my students and then ask them to try to fill in a chart listing the four political cultures and various aspects of popular culture. An example of some typical findings follows:

Four Cultures and Popular Culture

	<i>Elitists</i>	<i>Individuals</i>	<i>Egalitarians</i>	<i>Fatalists</i>
<i>Songs</i>	"God Save the Queen"	"I Did It My Way"	"We are the World"	"Anarchy in the UK"
<i>Books</i>	<i>The Prince</i>	<i>Looking Out For Number One</i>	<i>I'm Okay, You're Okay</i>	<i>1984</i>
<i>Games</i>	Chess	Monopoly	"New Games"	Russian Roulette
<i>Heroes</i>	Reagan	Iococca	Gandhi	Jim Jones

This chart gives an idea of how the four political cultures as audiences function in selecting texts and other aspects of popular culture that reflect their values. One complication is that since people change political cultures, a person's choices can either indicate the political culture he or she is in or the one he or she is planning to identify with. The list of topics can be extended considerably. (My books *Agitpop: Political Culture and Communication Theory* and *Political Culture and Public Opinion* deal with Wildavsky's theory in some detail and apply it to American popular culture and other subjects as well.)

### The Techniques of Humor

Humor is one of the most enigmatic subjects one can deal with. It pervades American popular culture, it is something people desperately crave, yet it resists analysis. There is still no agreement among humor scholars about why people laugh. And some of the greatest minds have tackled this problem — from Aristotle to Kant and Freud and numerous others.

Rather than deal with *why* people laugh, which may be an unanswerable question, I decided to investigate a different topic — *what makes people laugh*. I made a content analysis of a considerable amount of humor of all

kinds, everything from joke books to the theater of the absurd, and came up with 45 techniques that are, I argue, the building blocks of all humor.

These techniques fall under four categories — logic, language, identity, and action or visual humor. I have numbered them and listed them alphabetically, however, to enable people to use them with more precision.

#### Techniques of Humor in Alphabetical Order

- |                    |                      |                          |
|--------------------|----------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Absurdity       | 16. Embarrassment    | 31. Parody               |
| 2. Accident        | 17. Exaggeration     | 32. Puns                 |
| 3. Allusion        | 18. Exposure         | 33. Repartee             |
| 4. Analogy         | 19. Facetiousness    | 34. Repetition & Pattern |
| 5. Before/After    | 20. Grotesque        | 35. Reversal             |
| 6. Bombast         | 21. Ignorance        | 36. Ridicule             |
| 7. Burlesque       | 22. Imitation        | 37. Rigidity             |
| 8. Caricature      | 23. Impersonation    | 38. Sarcasm              |
| 9. Catalogue       | 24. Infantilism      | 39. Satire               |
| 10. Chase Scene    | 25. Insults          | 40. Scale, Size          |
| 11. Coincidence    | 26. Irony            | 41. Slapstick            |
| 12. Comparison     | 27. Literalness      | 42. Speed                |
| 13. Definition     | 28. Mimicry          | 43. Stereotypes          |
| 14. Disappointment | 29. Mistakes         | 44. Theme & Variation    |
| 15. Eccentricity   | 30. Misunderstanding | 45. Unmasking            |

Some of my techniques are a bit broad, but nevertheless, my typology can be used, I suggest, to analyze and explain what it is that generates humor in every humorous text, from graffiti to cartoons to dramatic comedies. I have used this typology to analyze everything from Plautus to Tom Stoppard, from comics and cartoons to popular jokes. These techniques may be significant in that if, for example, jokes using a certain technique or a limited number of techniques are popular at a particular period, we may learn something interesting — something more than the content or subject matter of the jokes tell us. Let me offer an example here.

#### *The Tan*

*A man goes to Miami Beach for a vacation. After a few days there he looks in the mirror and notices that he has a beautiful tan all over his body except for his penis. He decides to remedy the situation and get a perfect tan over his entire body. So the next day he gets up early, goes to a deserted part of the beach, strips naked, and lies down in the sand. He starts putting sand over his body until only his penis lies exposed to the sun. A short*

*while after he does this, two little old ladies are walking on the boardwalk. One notices the penis sticking up out of the sand. She points it out to her friend and says, "When I was 20, I was scared to death of them. When I was 40, I couldn't get enough of them. When I was 60, I couldn't get one to come near me ... And now they are growing wild on the beach!"*

The content of this joke is extremely interesting. Might I say revelatory? But let me focus here on the techniques of humor found in this joke.

First there is (15) *eccentricity*. The man wants a tan all over his body and will do anything to get it. Second, there is the matter of (29) *mistakes*; the woman sees the penis and mistakenly thinks that penises are now growing wild (and thus easily available). Third, there is the humor of (18) *exposure*. In a play frame, which we need for humor and which we get when jokes are told, we find exposing people's sexual parts and desires funny, for some reason. And there is also the technique of (34) *repetition and pattern*, which is employed when the woman talks about her relationships to penises at 20, 40 and 60 years of age. The formula for this joke is SEX/15-29-18-34.

Even in something as simple as a joke we find four different techniques at work, which suggests that humorous texts are much more complicated than we have imagined them to be. It is possible to use this typology to compare popular jokes at different periods in a given country or popular jokes at the same time period in different countries. I would suggest that American humor tends to use certain techniques (exaggeration) and neglect others (understatement). It is possible, using this typology, to characterize the humor of different areas or countries according to the dominant techniques used in popular humor — jokes, postcards, bumper stickers, and so on.

### **Concluding Remarks: A Personal Footnote**

What I have done is suggest a number of approaches to American culture, and thus I see this as a contribution to the problem of methodology that people studying American culture continually face — how do we study American culture (or any culture, for that matter). I have suggested that it makes good sense to look at popular culture as well as the elite arts in trying to understand American society and culture. This whole matter of the relationship between elite and popular culture is, it can be argued, now moot, since the postmodernists tell us that there is no significant difference between them. This is one consequence of maintaining an attitude of "incredulity toward metanarratives" as Lyotard puts it.

I have also offered a number of approaches to American culture that can yield interesting results and which can engage the minds of students —

many of whom, at least in America, supposedly have an attention span of just a few minutes.

Better this approach, which focuses on methods of analysis, than offering some of my zany interpretations of phenomena, such as the notion that McDonald's is an evangelical religion (in its dynamics) or that American houses are taking on the characteristics of motels. I made both of these analyses thirty years ago, but I happen to think they still are correct.

Some critics have suggested that I constantly engage in "put-ons" (they say things like "you can't be serious"). My answer would be not only am I serious but that I was postmodern before postmodernism and am still postmodern even though postmodernism is now passé, and we've entered an era of post-postmodernism. One cannot study popular culture in America for thirty years without being affected in various ways — neurologically, psychologically, aesthetically, and morally.

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