

Theories of Culture

Some approaches focus on the idea that those in power use popular culture to control those who aren't.

Cultural Decline approaches suggest everything is Getting Worse

The idea that culture is getting worse isn't new. Back in 1869, **Matthew Arnold** argued that **low culture** (he called it "philistine culture") was **taking over**. Later on, the literary critic **F.R. Leavis (1930)** wrote a great deal about the idea that high culture was in decline. Like Arnold, he felt that **low culture** was **dominant**, and that this was leading to **serious social damage**.

You can still find people expressing Leavis's sort of idea in books and newspaper columns.

The **cultural decline argument** says there's a **cycle of degradation**. It goes like this:

- 1) High culture is refined and improves its audience as people.
- 2) Low culture has bad values. It encourages swearing, violence, uncouth behaviour and general lack of respect.
- 3) Society gets worse because almost **nobody** is exposed to high culture and almost **everybody** is exposed to low culture.
- 4) As society gets worse, low culture gets even worse in response, and in turn brings society down even further.

Many critics feel that this is a **snobbish** and **elitist** perspective, which encourages the idea that some people in society are **naturally superior** to others. For example, **Marxists** have mostly been pretty **unsympathetic** to the cultural decline argument. On the other hand, some influential Marxists were very **pessimistic** about **low/mass culture** too, but for different reasons.

Marxism says that the working class are Oppressed by Capitalism via Culture

- 1) Many Marxists say it's all to do with **ideology**. They say everyone is **tricked** into accepting the idea that everything about society is **just fine**. Marxists from the **Frankfurt School** decided that the **mass media** were the main way of transmitting **capitalist ideology**. (The Frankfurt School began as a group of sociological thinkers in 1930s Germany.)
- 2) They argued that mass culture **helped capitalism** to oppress the working classes by **destroying community** and **individuality**. It also encouraged **acceptance of authority** and **discouraged people from thinking for themselves**.
- 3) In this way, capitalism used **mass culture** to **prevent revolution** from ever happening.

Some examples the Frankfurt School pointed out were:

- **Hollywood films** that distracted ordinary people from social issues, giving them **false dreams of glamour and adventure**.
- **Newspaper horoscopes** which suggested that a person's life experiences were down to **luck or fate**, rather than social structures or personal actions.
- **TV and radio advertising** that reinforced the values of capitalism.

Marxists said capitalism creates False Needs and Commodity Fetishism

- 1) **Capitalism** is based on **selling things**. According to Frankfurt School sociologists **Adorno and Horkheimer (1944)** mass culture encourages you to think you "**need**" to **buy things** which you don't need at all, such as a cupboard full of shoes or an iPod®. You **don't** actually **need** these things in the same way you need food and water and oxygen, but it's good for capitalism if you think you do. That's **false need**.
- 2) Another Marxist idea is **commodity fetishism**. This is where false needs create **obsessions** and **desires** about consumer goods — "**must-have**" objects. An example of this is when a new mobile phone comes out and everyone wants it. **Golding and Murdock (1991)** suggest that people buy products because capitalism promotes goods via the media.
- 3) **Adorno and Horkheimer** said commodity fetishism was like a religion.
- 4) According to them, the really clever trick is that **capitalism creates desires** that only **capitalism can satisfy**. This means we all end up thinking **capitalism is a good thing**, because it gives us **exactly what we want**.

So to sum up, the Frankfurt School took a **pessimistic** approach to mass culture:

- Mass culture is used to **dull the minds** of the working classes.
- Mass culture promotes **capitalist ideology**.
- **Commodity fetishism** encourages **economic activity**.
- The population are **passive victims** of mass culture.



Arnold liked his job, but had misunderstood when they had asked him to knead the bread.

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Not All Marxists agree with the Frankfurt School

- 1) The Italian thinker **Antonio Gramsci** (1891-1937) said that the idea of a **single mass culture** was too **simplistic**.
- 2) **Gramsci (1971)** thought that capitalism creates a big **dominant culture**. He called this dominance **hegemony**.
- 3) Gramsci believed that **capitalism** had to **tolerate** some oppositional cultures, rather than stamp them out. By **allowing some opposition** to exist, he said, capitalism could create the **illusion** that it was a **fair** and **free** system.
- 4) He had a big influence on the work of Marxists like **Stuart Hall** of the **Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies**. Hall says that **youth subcultures** help working class youths to **resist capitalist values**.
- 5) Hall, and other neo-Marxists who take a more positive, optimistic view of modern culture, prefer the term **popular culture** to mass culture.

Gramsci wrote most of his theories in prison, in the **1930s**. His prison notebooks were **published much later**. That's why the date of publication is well after he died.



Hegemony — nothing to do with dominant hedges. Apparently.

Feminism links popular culture to Socialisation and Patriarchy

Where Marxists see the mass media as promoting **capitalism**, feminists have concentrated on representations of **gender roles**. During the 1970s and 1980s, many feminists researched the relationship between **popular culture** and **gender socialisation**. Most of these studies suggested that popular culture **stereotypes** women into roles — such as housewife or sex object. These roles are then **reinforced** in society.

- 1) **Ferguson (1983)** and **McRobbie (1978)** studied magazines, and found that they promoted traditional female roles.
- 2) **Radical feminists**, such as **Andrea Dworkin (1981)** in her study of pornography, suggest that many images of women in popular culture encourage and justify **violence** against women.
- 3) More recently, some feminists have argued that popular cultural representations of women can also be **empowering**. For example, **Camille Paglia** has written a lot about Madonna's public image as a strong female role model.

Practice Questions

- Q1 Explain what is meant by "cultural decline".
- Q2 How do the Frankfurt School view popular culture?
- Q3 Explain how popular culture could be said to stereotype women.

Exam Question

Q1 Explain what is meant by "commodity fetishism". (2 marks)

Capitalism didn't tell me to want a new phone — the TV advert did...

According to the Frankfurt School, I didn't really need that Mina dress after all. If only Theodor Adorno could have tested me to tell me. Sigh. Anyway, make sure you know the nuts and bolts of these theoretical approaches, because you'll need them if you want to get top level marks. Without mentioning relevant theorists, you aren't going to win the examiner over.

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Get ready for some hardcore theory. This is the stuff that really shows those examiners that you know what you're talking about. Modernism, pluralism and postmodernism — it can look brain-bursting to start with, but once you get the key ideas, it all just falls into place.

Modernist sociologists believe society can be understood Scientifically

Modernism is a word that's used to mean many different things. In sociology it refers to the "classical sociological" approaches of **Marx** and **Durkheim**. Those two certainly didn't agree about everything, but they had some similar **beliefs** which meant that they can both be seen as modernist.

- They both believed that society was a **structure** — an organised system.
- They both believed that **social structures** controlled individuals, never the other way around.
- They both believed in the idea of **progress** — society improving over time.
- They both believed a **scientific** approach could explain society.

Marxism and functionalism are also known as structuralist viewpoints because they focus on structure.

In Modernism there are Two Opposing Views of Culture

- 1) The **Marxist** perspectives start from the idea that culture creates **false consciousness**. Marxists believe culture is all set up to **reinforce** the **class structure** and to **distract** the working classes from realising that they're being **oppressed**. According to Marx, this helps prevent **revolution** from taking place.
- 2) Marx thought that the working classes would eventually **realise** that they were being tricked and the **false consciousness** created by capitalist culture would be replaced by **class consciousness**. Then **revolution** would come. The **Frankfurt School** perspective described on p.6 is a good example of Marxist modernism.

- 1) Durkheim's **functionalist** perspective describes culture as a kind of **social glue**. It bonds people together by creating shared interests and purposes.
- 2) It also helps to **socialise** people into appropriate behaviour. This prevents society from **breaking down into chaos**.

It should be pretty clear that **Marx** and **Durkheim** saw culture as doing basically the **same thing** — **controlling people**. The difference was, Marx thought that this was a bad thing, while Durkheim believed it was necessary and good.

Semiotic Analysis looks for Hidden Structures of Meaning

- 1) An important approach to popular culture is **semiotics**. This perspective is based on the ideas of the linguist **Ferdinand de Saussure** (1857-1913). Saussure was a **structuralist** — he thought that meaning was found in the **structure** of language, rather than in the **individual words** of a language.
- 2) According to semiotics, society is full of **signifiers** (words, symbols and images) — which create **meanings**.
- 3) Meanings can be either **denoted** or **connoted**. **Denoted** (or denotative) meanings are **obvious**. **Connoted** (or connotative) meanings are **suggested** — you don't see them right away, and may only notice them **subconsciously**.
- 4) For example, a **picture** of a gun **denotes** a gun. A picture of a gun **connotes** all sorts of things — **power, masculinity, death, gangsters, fear** and so on.
- 5) Quite a lot of **sociological work** on culture now involves **semiotic analysis**, looking for the **connotative** meanings of cultural objects. This can be from all kinds of perspectives. For example, **Dick Hebdige** (1979) took a **Marxist** approach to his semiotic analysis of **punk**, while **Ann DuCille's** (1996) analysis of the **Barbie™** doll was focused on **feminism** and **ethnicity**.

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Pluralists say we have Power through Choice

Pluralists think that popular culture **reflects society**.

- 1) They argue that there is a **range of consumer goods** available which gives people lots of **choice**, e.g. different magazines, different brands of trainers, different films to go and see.
- 2) People have the **power to choose** the products they like — this is called **consumer power**. Consumers are **active**, not passive.
- 3) The cultural industry **takes notice** of what consumers want — it's in their interests to **create products** that people will buy.
- 4) Therefore, it is the **consumers** who **shape popular culture** — not the other way round.

However, not everyone agrees with the pluralists. For example, **Ian Ang (1991)** suggests that the **opinions** of consumers are largely **ignored** by the cultural industry.



The chin-flator SGOO.
Surely a must-have!

Postmodernism argues that Culture is Diverse

- 1) Postmodernists reject the idea that culture helps to unify people in society. Instead they argue that **culture is increasingly diverse**.
- 2) Postmodernists like **Stuart Hall (1992)** say that this diversity results in **fragmented identities**. People can **construct their identity** from a range of different cultures. Layers of identity can include nationality, gender, ethnicity, religion and political beliefs.
- 3) Hall links this with the rise of **new social movements** such as feminism, black power, and the green movement. He also links this with **globalisation** — as a response to cultural globalisation, people have constructed new identities such as "Black British", "British Muslim", "Somali living in London" etc.
- 4) The way people **use culture** reflects their **fragmented identity**. Some sociologists have looked at the way that British Asians pick and mix aspects of traditional **Indian and Pakistani** culture, black **hip-hop culture** and British **urban culture** to make a **hybrid culture**.

Postmodernists say signifiers are more powerful than the things they signify

- 1) In other words, the **name and image** we give to something has more meaning than the thing itself.
- 2) There are lots of examples in popular culture — e.g. **brands**. Look at the counterfeit "label" goods on any street market in the country. The **only selling point** for a cheaply made, fake Gucci watch is the name on the product.
- 3) **Baudrillard (1981)** suggests that in the postmodern age **symbols** have become commodities, and that we no longer buy products for what they are but for the things they represent.

Practice Questions

- Q1 What does modernism mean?
- Q2 What is semiotic analysis?
- Q3 What is consumer power?
- Q4 What did Stuart Hall mean by "fragmented identities"?

Exam Question

- Q1 Assess the view that culture helps to unify society.

(24 marks)

What a load of Baudrillard...

The modernist viewpoints ought to be familiar — it's only old functionalism and Marxism all over again. Pluralists think ordinary people have some control over culture. Postmodernists are obsessed with symbolism. And Scientologists think that people were brought to Earth by the alien ruler Xenu in a spacecraft 75 million years ago... Fortunately you don't need to revise that last lot.