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BA (Hons) Graphic Design

Critical and Theoretical Studies

FFC1002: Introduction to Graphic Design History and Culture

## **How did Pop break down the barriers between 'high' and 'low' culture?**

### **Discuss with reference to specific practitioners and their work.**

Pop art originated in the 1950s/1960s as a reaction to the post war consumer society. The movement was a result of changing tastes and the increasing influences of American society and culture on Britain. During the Second World War, Britain suffered huge economic losses which had a direct effect on the growth of mass culture. In contrast, America was able to maintain economic growth and this meant that there was rapid growth in consumerism.

At this time there was a distinct difference in what the classes considered 'entertainment' which was referred to as 'high' culture and 'low' culture. Low culture was considered to be kitsch - things in low culture were popular with the masses and in poor taste, these included things such as popular music and cinema. High culture was considered to be things which attracted the upper classes, such as fine art and theatre.

During this essay I will be looking at several British Pop Artists and their work and referring to some American pop artists and their work, to help illustrate the differences between the social classes after the second world war and to show how the movement helped to destroy these ideas and boundaries. It is important to determine that pop art produced by British artists is very different from that produced by American pop artists. The main difference between pop art in America and Britain was that American art was done on a large scale whereas British art was done on a domestic scale, making it smaller.

Fine art in British society at the time was seen as something of high culture, which was enjoyed by the upper classes, who studied, enjoyed and bought paintings and sculptures. Pop art by British artists was considered more 'arty' than pieces by their American counterparts and so for this reason was enjoyed by several different generations and classes, thus being a factor in breaking down the barriers between the cultures.

The first forays into pop art in Britain happened in the late 1950's. Artists such as Eduardo Paolozzi visited America after the war and were amazed and intrigued by the extent of popular culture which they saw. Paolozzi's first set of work to be considered as pop art was produced between 1948 and 1950 and was a series of images taken from comics, magazines and advertisements. These were collected for his own reference as a record of the American imagery that he had not seen before and were later reproduced as screen printed collages called 'Bunk!' This was a series of images which would later be hailed as one of the first pieces of British pop art.

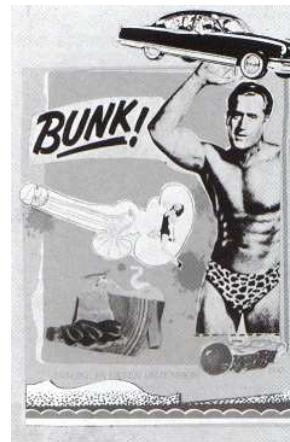


Figure 1

Paolozzi was a member of The Independent Group; this was a group of artists, writers and designers who discussed the relationships between art and consumerism. They looked at the relationship between high and low culture, which essentially was what they considered to be good and bad taste and used these discussions to produce images and artwork. British artist Richard Hamilton was also a member and it was he who designed the poster for the

group's first exhibition called 'This is Tomorrow'. The exhibition attracted over 1900 visitors and celebrated things in popular culture. The work displayed here was called Pop Art.

Richard Hamilton's poster was entitled 'Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?' (see Fig 2). According to Jamie James (2003) the poster encompasses all of the themes of the Pop art style, including male and female sexuality, popular entertainment and advancing technologies. It was



Figure 2

considered by many to be the first work of pop art, despite pieces by Paolozzi and American artist Jasper Johns coming first. Hamilton summed up the work which was being displayed at 'This is tomorrow' by saying it was

“Popular (designed for a mass audience), Transient (short term, solution), Expendable (easily forgotten), Low cost, Mass produced, Young (aimed at youth), Witty, Sexy, Gimmicky, Glamorous, Big business” (Jamie James, 2004)

which clearly summed up the attitudes and ideas behind the work and also helps us to understand the appeal of the movement and how it was able to break down pre-conceived ideas on entertainment for the different classes.

Richard Hamilton produced several other more stylised pieces after the 'This is Tomorrow' exhibition, which showed an interest in products of consumer society as opposed to music, film and 'celebrity'. Hamilton and the other members of the Independent group were increasingly fascinated by the new American cars that were being produced. In his piece 'Hommage à Chrysler Corp' in 1957, he expressed this interest. This style was followed up with his 1958-61 piece called '\$he' in which he made use of large scale advertising imagery to convey the appeal of women and money.

By the 1960's there were pop artists on both sides of the Atlantic. American artists such as Andy Warhol were popular in Britain as well as America. Warhol took the idea of high and low culture and challenged it in order to make art. His images were reproductions of popular images, often of popular figures or products, making them appeal to the youth market. The post war youth had a disposable income for the first time, which ultimately led to the rise in consumerism in Britain. Consumerism meant that products had a short shelf life and so the idea of a throw away society was coined. The older generation began to become concerned that British society was becoming too americanised. This made big British corporations like the BBC fear that they would lose authority and so the generation gap was established. The older generation of Britons were still recovering from the war which had hit the

British economy hard. People of this generation were still trying to cling on to the things that they had and were less ready to accept new ideas.



Figure 3

Warhol's images of popular American stars such as Marilyn Monroe (see figure 3) and Elvis Presley (see figure 4) helped to contribute to this idea and fed the youth culture market on both sides of the Atlantic. His style of overlapping and layering multiple copies of the same image is now one of the most recognised of all pop art.



Figure 4

During the 1950's, the British pop artists, including Peter Blake, Eduardo Paolozzi and Richard Hamilton were creating the guidelines for British pop art by either celebrating or criticising mass culture. The style was cemented in British culture when graduates from The Royal College of Art held an exhibition called 'The Young Contemporaries' in 1961. The show included work by David Hockney who later went on to create many of his own pieces of pop art, including one of his most famous pieces called 'Tea Painting in an Illusionistic style' which depicted a box of Typhoo tea, much like what Andy Warhol had done with images of Coca Cola bottles and Campbell's soup cans in America.

During this time, London quickly became the youth culture capital, where different social classes mixed and the lines between 'good' and 'bad' taste began to break down. Disposable income of the youth was spent on magazines, cinema and fashion, which only served to intensify the shift from split cultures to one which was readily accepted by all. The younger generation were less set in their ways than their parents and so were more open to the new ideas available to them. This was only emphasised through the music of the time, with well known acts such as The Beatles and The Rolling Stones, whose appeal crossed a wide variety of social classes, genders and ages.

Many pop artists at this time were designing album sleeves for such bands. One of the most famous of these was the Sgt. Pepper album sleeve designed by Peter Blake who also designed album covers for Elvis Presley. As was typical of pop art at this time, the Beatles album cover (see figure 5) was made up of a collage of photography and found images. It included images of other popular famous faces and made use of the bright colours and image reproduction which was popular at the time.

Peter Blake included symbols of youth culture in most of his works since 1950. In his painting entitled 'Self Portrait with badges' which he painted in 1961 he included himself as an adult, wearing denim covered in pin badges and holding an Elvis

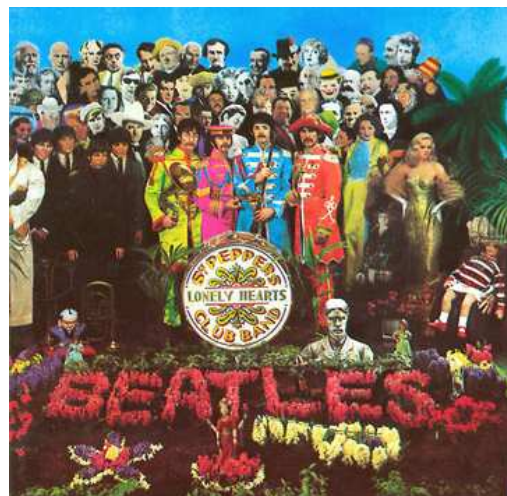


Figure 5

Presley magazine. According to Marco Livingstone (2003) this was not necessarily a reflection on Blake's own tastes in music and culture but a sign of his sense of community, where the youth culture was represented by the choice of clothing and music. Elvis Presley appeared in several other of Blake's works, including a piece entitled 'The Alphabet Series' where he was included as the letter K and labelled 'K is for King'.

Pop stars and film stars were featured heavily in his work. He found that

“once the term pop had come into use in England, he interpreted it as a challenge to produce an art whose meanings would be accessible and direct as that of popular music and other expressions of mass culture.”

(Marco Livingstone, 2004)

The inclusion of popular culture in art meant that upper classes were being exposed to 'low' culture while partaking in activities that were still very much considered to be 'high' culture. Images such as Peter Blake's album covers and Richard Hamilton's 'Swinging London 67', which was a photograph of Mick Jagger under arrest only helped to implant mass culture into the consciousness of the public as a whole. Mass culture was seeping into all areas of entertainment, meaning that things which were once considered to be low culture and only for the working classes were now appealing to all. While mass culture may have still been considered to be kitsch by many of the upper classes, it was now also something which they used for entertainment.



According to Sociology central (March 2004) in order to break down barriers between high and low cultures it is important to give them something in common or to impose the cultural ideas of one class onto another. This is essentially what happened with pop culture in the 1950s and 60s. Popular culture became so mainstream and so popular among the masses that it was difficult to escape. Pop art appealed to the younger audiences, who had broader and more open views, while still appealing to the older generation, who were more set in their ways. Popular music, cinema and fashion spanned many social classes, particularly in the youth market and it was no longer necessary to distinguish a person's social class through what they wore. So in a way pop art was imposing itself onto the masses by dealing with subjects which pleased them but in an inoffensive way. Richard Hamilton's quote when referring to the 'This is Tomorrow' exhibition best helps to show this when he described it as 'expendable, witty, sexy, glamorous' meaning that it is easily forgotten while still possessing the qualities to charm and engage the audience.

This huge shift in what was included in art and what was seen and used to make art, helped to break down the barriers between high and low culture. This essentially would not have been possible without the rapid growth of consumerism after the war, which made things in mass culture so available and so popular. It is also due to the youth culture that these barriers were broken down. Had it not been for their disposable income and interest in new technologies, fashions and products then mass culture would have had such a dramatic affect on society. .

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